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ABSTRACT

Articles in this theme issue explore the state of children and youth at the end of the millennium. Imagination and the arts, ethnographic and interpretive exploration, and traditional social science investigations are used to consider the meaning of childhood and what life is like for children today. The articles are: (1) "Children at Risk/Children of Promise: Youth and the Modern Predicament" (William Ayers); (1) "A Whole Different Story: The View from the Far Side of Success" (Mark Larson with Vernon Hill and Mary Unger); (3) "To the Honorable Judge Green" (Lisa Kenner); (4) "Poetry" (by students); (5) "Like a Tree Standing by the Water: Urban Gardeners Shall Not Be Moved" (Melody Ermachild Chavis); (6) "La Silent: What Is To Be Done?" (Rick Ayers); (7) "Bad Boys" (Alice Brent); (8) "Dangerous Minds: Experiences in Chicago's West Side High Schools" (Jennifer Smith); (9) "And Ya Don't Stop: Using Hip Hop in the Language Arts Classroom" (Wayne Wah Kwai Au); (10) "Give Children the Vote" (Vita Wallace); (11) "False Assumptions" (Greg Mitchie); (12) "Time To Change the No-Pager Law in Chicago Schools" and "What's All the Fuss over South Park" (Elizabeth Jennifer Small); (13) "Poetry" (by students); and (14) "Evolution" (Byron Mason). (SLD)

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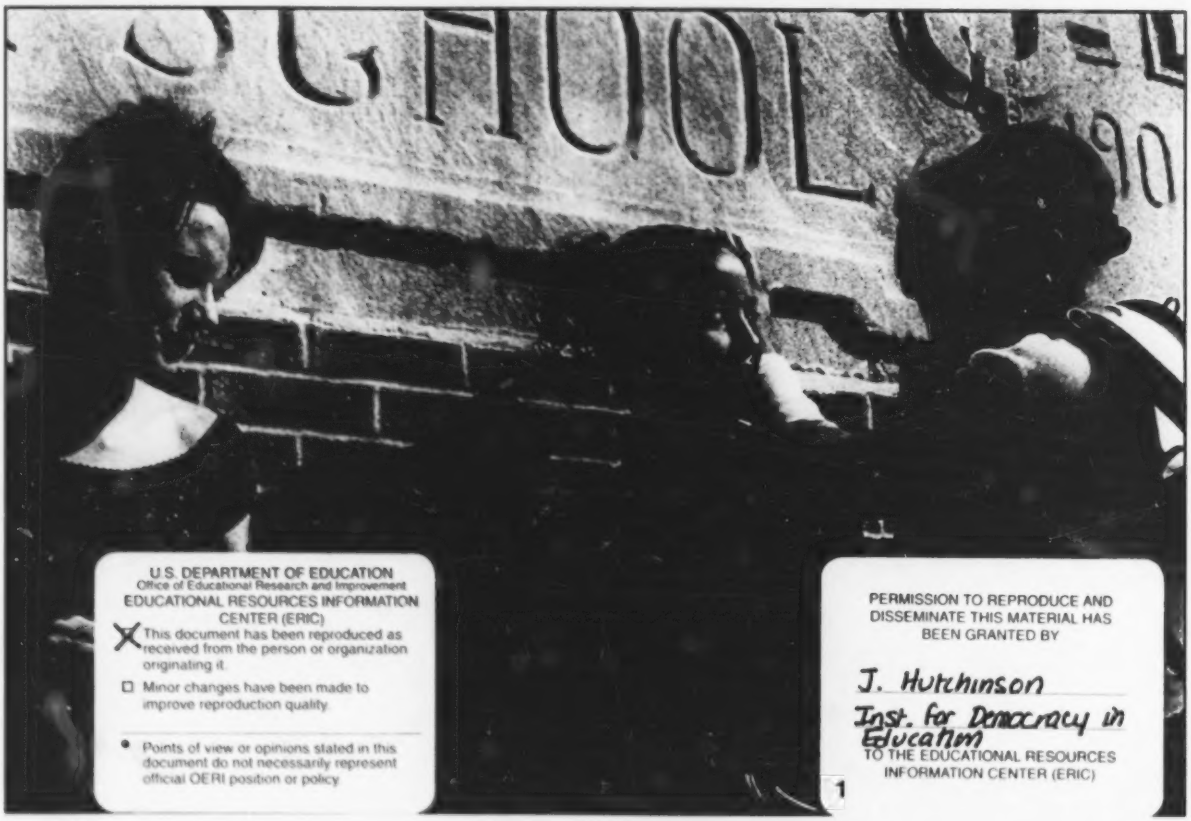
Democracy & Education

The magazine for classroom teachers

CHILDREN AT RISK/CHILDREN OF PROMISE

Youth and the Modern Predicament



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EDITORS: William Ayers, Gabrielle Lyon, Gina McKinney, James O'Brien, and Therese Quinn

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Statement of Purpose

Democracy & Education, the magazine for classroom teachers, is a journal of the **Institute for Democracy in Education.**

IDE is a partnership of all participants in the educational process — teachers, administrators, parents and students — who believe that democratic school change must come from those at the heart of education.

IDE promotes educational practices that provide students with experiences through which they can develop democratic attitudes and values. Only by living them can students develop the democratic ideals of equality, liberty and community.

IDE works to provide teachers committed to democratic education with a forum for sharing ideas with a support network of people holding similar values, and with opportunities for professional development.

Democracy & Education is the main editorial outlet of **IDE**, which also sponsors conferences and workshops and publishes curricular materials. **Democracy & Education** tries to serve the ideals we value in our classrooms and our lives by providing information, sharing experiences and reviewing resources. For more information or to become a member of the **Institute for Democracy in Education,** please write or call:

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DEMOCRACY & EDUCATION

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dialogue

Editor's Introduction

Children at Risk/Children of Promise:
Youth and the Modern Predicament

By William Ayers

Kenzaburo Oe, winner of the 1994 Novel Prize for Literature, wrote his first novel, *Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids,* (Grove Press, 1996, NY) as a student in 1958. In it, he tells the story of a small band of juvenile delinquent boys evacuated during wartime to a remote mountain village where they are feared and hated by the superstitious and cruel inhabitants. The unnamed narrator— a boy who had been first sent to a reformatory for stabbing a schoolmate, escaped, was recaptured and sent again — describes a time "when maddened adults ran riot in the streets and there was a strange mania for locking up those with skin that was smooth all over or with just a little glowing chestnut down: those who had committed petty offences; including those simply judged to have criminal tendencies." When the fear of plague erupts, the villagers flee in the night and the boys are cut off, abandoned and barricaded inside the village to die. There, outside of time and in an autonomous space, the boys try to build a purposeful community of self-respect and love. The deaths of the narrator's brother and his brief lover prefigure the terror unleashed by the returning adults.

Locked in an outhouse the boys are berated by the village headman, "You deserve to be beaten to death for any one of the things you did while we were away . . . You broke into the houses and stole food. What's more, you slept in them and left piss and shit all over the place. Someone broke the tools . . ."

After a string of threats and beatings and humiliations, the villagers change their tack. Preparing for the return of the warden they agree to let the crimes be bygones if the boys will tell a story to the warden of normalcy. The narrator objects, "We were abandoned by your village. Then we lived in the village where there might have been an outbreak of plague. Then you came back and locked us up. I'm not going to keep quiet about it . . ."

The headman shouts him down, "Hey, who do you think you are? Someone like you isn't really human. You vermin can only pass on your bad blood. You'll be no good when you're grown up . . . Listen, someone like you should be throttled while they're still a kid. We squash vermin while it's still small . . . we nip the buds early."

The narrator realizes that no one will believe him anyway, that he holds no power in this world of adults who make the wars and also make the rules: "I was only a child, tired, insanely angry, tearful, shivering with cold and hunger." Banished in the night, forced to flee, he believes that "outside I would never be able to escape. Both inside and outside, tough fingers and rough arms were patiently waiting to squash and strangle me."

Oe goes through the looking glass, turning the by now commonsense *Lord of the Flies* view of the evil nature of children and childhood on its head. His wrath is reserved for the adult world.

Oe captures something terrifyingly familiar about the predicament of youth today: the profound sense of alienation and disconnection, the vivid feeling of vulnerability at the hands of adults gone mad, the dark impression of being neither seen nor heard nor understood. It is a stark, a frightening portrait.

In this journal we will inquire into the state of children and youth at the end of the millennium. Using imagination and the arts, ethnographic and interpretive exploration, and more traditional social science investigations, we will pursue several questions: What is the meaning of childhood? What is life like for young people today? What are society's larger goals and purposes for children and youth? What are the hopes and aspirations of youth themselves? How do we know? How are various goals in conflict or contradiction? In what ways do various institutions support or undermine those goals? How shall we respond to the dreams of youth?

The journal will link the issues facing youth today to a larger vision of justice, democracy, and the possibility of ethical action in a world where the public space is under increasing attack and where large, impersonal forces constrain and distort human activity.

Editors

William Ayers is a professor of education and University Scholar at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His most recent books are *A Kind and Just Parent: The Children of Juvenile Court* (Beacon Press, 1977) and co-edited with Therese Quinn and Jean Ann Hunt, *Teaching for Social Justice* (Teachers College Press/The New Press, 1998)

Gina McKinney earned her Bachelor of Science in Biology from Clark Atlanta University in 1995, and her M.Ed. in Elementary Education from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1998. She is currently working as a science teacher, and as a school reform activist.

Therese Quinn is a museum reform activist and doctoral student in Education at the University of Illinois-Chicago. This is the second special issue of *Democracy and Education* she has edited.

Gabrielle Lyon is outreach coordinator at the Small Schools Workshop at University of Illinois at Chicago. She facilitates school restructuring and reform efforts and coordinates special curriculum projects. Lyon also directs the School Change Institutte, a yearlong training program that prepares people to work as External Partners to schools on academic warning lists.

James O'Brien is a doctoral student in Education Policy Studies at the University of Illinois-Chicago. Previous to his graduate study, he taught sixth-grade and coached basketball in Compton, California.

A Whole Different Story

THE VIEW FROM THE FAR SIDE OF SUCCESS

BY **MARK LARSON**

ILLUSTRATION BY **CARLOS DIAZ**

Annie, one of three white seniors in my English make-up class, said something about the *facade* of one of the characters in the story we'd just read aloud together.

The other students, five Hispanic and thirteen African-American, howled at Annie's use of the word *facade*. They sprayed the room with derision:

Who you supposed to be?
Think you sound all educated!

And the most difficult for me, their teacher, to swallow:

What are you *doing in here?*

In here. In this class for failures, most of them minority students; in here, separated from the other 2800 students who had done what school had asked of them; in here, where the student body's racial mix of 47% white, 43% African-American and 6% Hispanic is not reflected — not even close; in here, where we house those who have grown accustomed to failure and disillusionment to the point where they no longer care; in here, where all that the students ask is for the D they need to avoid having to repeat the class again.

What are *you* doing here, Annie? You who are white, who sit quietly and won't join in when we razz each other; who won't laugh at our jokes; who grimaces or looks away when you think we're too loud; you who use words we never heard of, who talks *proper*, who does the homework, who is so *correct* the teacher never hassles you. What are *you* doing in *here*?

I dropped my head at that question. The implication was as clear as it was appalling: We *know* what *we're* doing here. We're in here because we are, as Juan once said, a "minority class," and because, as Walter said, "we been marked since Day One." Vernon, in an essay in which he weighs the virtues of "thug life" vs. school, wrote, "The school life is a whole different story, school makes them feel weird, like it's a whole different world."

When I met my Survey students on the first day of class, I bluntly asked them how they ended up in here. They were not shy about answering. The reasons were many and varied: obstinate failure to do the assigned work "I hated that teacher and he hated me so what do you expect?;" multiple absences ("I had all these court dates I had to go-do" or "I was getting to be a papa, so my little girl took a lot of my time away."); difficulty handling the material (two students, for example, had recently arrived from Mexico and, though their spoken English was excellent, their written English was, at times, nearly indecipherable. One student, the new papa, wrote about the fateful day he and his girl friend had "uppertected sex"). I also had several students who'd transferred in from other schools and somehow lost a credit in the shuffle. They had no serious skill deficiencies that I could determine. All of the students in this make-up class were simultaneously enrolled in another English class most of them in lower or middle tracks; however, two students, including Annie, were enrolled in my honors course. Both of them were excellent readers and could discuss with great insight the works we read. Apparently, one year they just couldn't bring themselves to do the assigned written work. They can't really explain it, they say. That's what they were doing in here.

Ours is a school with much to boast about. We have excellent, deeply committed teachers, beautiful, well-equipped facilities, and a graduation rate of 89.9%. Most of those kids do go off to college, many of them to the top schools in the country. This year we had three of Illinois' six Westinghouse semi-finalists. The list of accomplishments could be endless.

And yet, when I was assigned this one-semester survey course last year, I discovered it had no curriculum, no texts, no guiding objective. When I inquired about this, I was told that in the past, teachers had ordered a class subscription to *Newsweek* and worked from that, reading and discussing and taking quizzes, I presume. I was asked to design something different over the summer. Based on what? To accom-

plish what? I asked. No one seemed to know. So I started at the beginning, trying to determine the purpose of the course. But that was a struggle; I kept coming up empty. Finally I realized why I couldn't see the purpose: it sat right in front of me. The obvious and only function of this course was to make up credit for graduation, as if it was nothing more than a matter of seat-time, time owed. The school seemed to say by their silence that however I accomplished that was fine.

Jane Addams, founder of Hull House, once posed an irritating question: "How shall we respond to the dreams of youth?" (Ayers, 1993). I haven't, since reading the question, been able to get it out of my mind, and that's why I think of it as an irritant. When I end yet one more day in my Survey class still wondering what this course is about, for, meant to accomplish, I'm chastened by Addams' challenge—and it *is* a challenge, not an idle question. Then answer, despite what I *wish* I could say, has to be, "I respond with what I did today."

And that hurts. Because what I did today was just buy time while I thought yet one more day about what I should be doing in here. I kept them busy with what I knew and they knew was meaningless work or, for a break, showed a film. Again. And again tried to justify it. Or I opened a discussion on a topic I wasn't able to guide out of the baseness of talk show-style tirades into something creative and worthwhile.

At the start of the year, my head had been filled with all the new information and theories I'd accumulated over the summer. In preparation for this class, I'd read widely (Delpit, Ladson-Billings, Kozol, Mike Rose and more), attended workshops, talked a lot with successful teachers of students placed at risk, thought long and hard and done some writing of my own. I was determined to hold standards high (an important theme around my school these days), to keep that homework coming (as per the new homework policy), to make my expectations clear. After co-facilitating a series of staff development workshops on the topic of Minority Student Achievement (who *me*?), I was eager to bring every student and every situation a fuller understanding of behaviors and attitudes that had once baffled me. *Ahh, now I get it!* Most importantly, after reading Lisa Delpit (1995), I was going to begin with a clearer, more informed awareness of my own "cultural lens" and its impact on my interactions with students of other races and backgrounds. In short, I was charged with the zeal of the recently-informed, and ignited by the idealism that arrives every September with the chance for another shot at the crucial work at hand.

But the story I have to tell you here is a whole different story from the one I wish I could tell. I wish I could tell you about how my perseverance and astute (albeit, newly acquired) understanding

Sweet Girl

LEARN TO GET IN TOUCH WITH SILENCE WITHIN YOURSELF AND KNOW THAT EVERYTHING IN THIS LIFE HAS A PURPOSE.

— ELIZABETH KUBLER-ROSS

BY MARY UNGER

I was sitting in my basement the other day when I realized how much my friends confide in me. From eating disorders to abusive parents to hysterectomies to love, people tell me these things. I used to think watching paint dry was more exciting than anything that went on in my or any of my friends' lives, and I wondered if anything interesting would ever happen to us. Then one day I find myself sitting with two of my good friends and they tell me of the pain and discomfort and fear they are going through, and I think *oh my God, this is like something out of a bad movie*. I'm sitting on my futon in my basement holding onto my best friend while she breaks down and regurgitates everything she's been holding back. And what do I say? What do I say? I think back to all those bad movies I suffered through and I try to remember what things were said then. My mind is racing, but getting nowhere fast, so I speak as best I can. It's an impromptu speech, unrehearsed and translated, a little choppily, from my heart. It's all that I can offer and as I sit there holding her, I want nothing more than to take her pain and make it mine. I know I can endure it and deal with it and go through with it because no pain is greater than seeing someone you love go through it. I sit there — unaware that I am now having to deal with issues which I thought I had to turn to a talk show to get a taste of. I sit there and try my hardest to soothe her and comfort her, but I know the best thing for her is for her to speak and let everything out. It's a cleansing ritual. She sits there as tears slide down her cheeks relentlessly and it scares me a little to watch her and see the pain and confusion she's going through. I want nothing more at this moment than for her to be happy. I think back on the world and everything in it and I am amazed at how overwhelming it is. I think of how wondrous it can be. How enormous and full of and overflowing with stuff. Then I think of how, even though the world is so

of the obstacles faced by my kids combined with my deep caring for every one of my students created miracles: how they amazed everyone by going on to get the top scores on the English AP test; how Juan changed his mind about becoming a mechanic and enrolled in a college where he could put his magnificently agile mind to work, how Robert, one of the most insightful kids I've ever known, decided that dropping out to work full time in his dad's cell phone store really wasn't such a good career move. But that's not how it went.

I write this at the end of the first semester, just as baffled as ever by how few real gains I've made and how often I've had to retreat from the lofty standards I'd established for my students and me.

They still miss deadlines and don't care. I take the class to the computer lab in advance of due dates for papers, but even then, the work is not completed. I've discovered that I have at least five seniors who are wholly unable to use a word processor. They laboriously hunt and peck with one finger. Progress is excruciatingly slow. (I'd like to know how this happened after they spent four years in an institution which owns and has available to students some 400 computers. And I want to know what I can do about it in one semester now that it has.) Though it is against one of my stated policies, I've allowed many of my students to turn in handwritten papers so I could at least, at last, see their work. Have I lowered expectations or have I responded realistically to the situation? Most of the work, when it is turned in, is incomplete, rough, and displays serious deficiencies in the areas of reading comprehension and writing. How do I respond in the time I have? What could I — should I — realistically expect? I'm a much better teacher of writing when I'm working with proficient writers. I need to know more than I do about how to teach writing to older students who require assistance with the basics.

Behavior still gets out of hand at times, and I'm still not sure what to do about it. When our class discussions hit on a topic of high interest, say "crooked cops," the volume in the room soars, students talk over each other and shout one another down to the point where the quieter kids (in this case, Annie and every one of my Hispanic students) shut down. The kids doing the talking are impassioned and extremely articulate. I want to hear them, and I want to help move these discussions, eventually, to the page. But I can't do that when everyone shouts. So I end up having to bring the conversation to a halt, and we review, again, our ground rules for discussion. Everyone nods agreement; yes, we all know it has to be this way. We're sorry. And they are. But once the topic opens again — those "f---ing crooked cops" — the shouting resumes. I like the energy, the kids' passion to be heard, but I feel I don't have the skills required to guide it productively.

Most students in that class are bored with reading, almost any kind of

beautiful, it can destroy people as well. And my proof is her, sitting next to me, still crying. I sit there, words tumbling uncertainly out of my mouth, holding, wishing, praying. I want to be so wise.

She sits there, probably not even aware that I am speaking, but I am on the spot. I have to say something so wise and so sensitive it will solve all the problems and crises on the Earth. How am I supposed to make sense of what I see around me? I've been trying that for years, and look where it's gotten me: wedged on a lopsided futon between a musty old pillow and a breaking heart. And what do I do? For some reason it feels right not to know some things. I sit there, scared, worried, helpless. Is anything I'm saying making sense? Even if it does cure the pain for now, she will still have to face it and return to it later. I think about love, fear, life. How do you conquer them? I think back on all those who have hurt me. How I wanted to hurt them back, but couldn't. How I was too scared to. Call it being scared, call it being confused, call it being...This night as I sit uncomfortably, I refuse to adjust myself in hopes that my discomfort will somehow take away some of hers, and I wrap my arm around her quivering, crumbling shoulder. Its grip strengthens and I long to squeeze all the hurt out of her. Her tears are doing a tremendously slow job. But will that do the trick? She sits there now, quietly, restlessly, and shakes in the still air while her agony situates itself in her expression. I suppose I should offer her a Kleenex...

I look around me this night and I wonder what happened? What actually happened to put me in this predicament? I'm practically eighteen years old, just waiting for my life to begin, and yet so scared. My friends and I will be graduating this June and going off to college soon thereafter, and what will become of us? Can we deals with all that's out there, and even if we can, do we want to? Will it be worth it? All we want is to go to college, get married, have kids and be happy. I'm not even sure if I want to grow up yet. (People always ask me what I want to be when I grow up. Well, what's wrong with what I am now?) Our lives are hurdling towards us, but we're frozen. What do we do next? Since none of us know, we spread our lives out in front of each other in a mosaic of emotions, voices, memories and spirit. We share our fears, doubts, happiness and confusion, in hopes someone will have an answer. After that, when we have collapsed from emotional exhaustion, all we can do is join hands and laugh. And our laughter carries us on an on . . .

This night we huddle under the flickering fluorescent lights of my basement on a riasety futon whose creaks and moans cover up our own. We huddle, uncertain of the future, uncertain of ourselves, uncertain of getting through. This night we hope, believe, hold on tight, endure.

Mary Unger is a graduate of Evanston Township High School in suburban Chicago. She is a recipient of the National Council of Teaching award for writing. She is currently a freshman at the University of Illinois-Champaign.

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reading, whether we do it out loud or individually. I listen to their conversations with each other before and during class for hints to their interests and make an effort to choose material that I think may catch their attention. But the mere sight of paper, regardless of what's on it, elicits groans, rolled eyes, the dropping of heads. I need to know more about the fundamentals of teaching reading, and how people learn to read and what gets in their way and what to do about it. I've never learned.

Once I had a brief, unexpected breakthrough. I gave them an article about LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman, the teenagers from Chicago's southside who had made two documentaries for National Public Radio, *Ghetto Life 101* and *Remorse: The 13 stories of Eric Morse*, and had recently published a book called, *Our America*. I played the tapes of both programs, we read the articles about the boys and portions of their book. Interest and enthusiasm was high. I had something to work with, here. Further, I happened to know LeAlan; he's visited my classroom twice in the past, so I told my students that he might be persuaded to visit again. Though he was now in college far way, he had promised me he'd stop by during his winter break. At the very least, I told my kids, we can e-mail him questions, and I'm sure he would answer. I created a research-type assignment around LeAlan. We would read and think about how he put the difficult circumstances of growing up on the south side to work for him. Though the project started out well, my students quickly lost interest in this, too. What had happened, I finally asked. Again they were frank with me.

"This is bogus," they said. They weren't interested in LeAlan. They were interested in Lloyd. Why? Because LeAlan had been on honor roll, was captain of the football team and had made it to college. Lloyd, though the same age as LeAlan, had failed high school and currently was making up credit in an alternative high school. One of my students, Alfie, seemed to speak for the class when he said, "Lloyd I can relate to." In retrospect, of course, this made perfect sense, but I had missed it. I tried shifting the focus to Lloyd, but by then it was too late. The project had crumbled. Their attention was everywhere but here. They were "sick" of the whole story. I had missed the mark. Again. I hadn't thought hard enough, been careful enough, listened well enough.

My failure in that class is not for lack of trying. I attempted something new almost every day. We watched a movie (*The Piano Lesson*) and talked about plot construction,; we analyzed the promotion in the media of *Amistad* then went to see the film; we compared the ways different newspapers covered the same stories. But to what end, I kept wondering?

I'm telling you, here, about one fifth of my classroom day. The other four fifths are spent with honors and Advanced Placement students, some of the most accomplished kids (academically and otherwise), in our school. I have one of this year's Westinghouse semi-finalists, and next year, many of my students will head off for places like Princeton, Columbia, Yale and Harvard. And though I'm very proud of them, I am not the teacher I hope to be if I point to these students and boast while I let yet another day go by without significant progress in Survey.

Why am I telling you all of this? Why aren't I telling you one of those uplifting teacher stories that will inspire you and make you want to be more like me? Because I believe this: if I am going to improve and one day become an effective educator for *all* children, I cannot afford to fear what I don't know and can't do. I believe I must articulate my limitations to myself, my colleagues and administrators, and even my students, so I can search for ways to exceed them. And I can't allow these inadequacies to pile up and hold me down. I can't afford to let myself be impeded by the seeming magnitude or complexity or incomprehensibility of the predicament. The questions raised are voids to be filled, challenges to meet not reason for despair. And it seems to me that filling voids and meeting challenges is one of the great, joyful, worthwhile responsibilities of life. Just as we want our students to believe that they are capable of what we ask them, we need to believe that we are, given effort and practice, capable of what *they* ask of *us*. But we have to start by being honest. So I told you the real story, not the story that ends with Robert and me playing a bit of one-on-one basketball in the gym or Vernon reciting for the class his favorite Shakespeare sonnet or Marcus reading the poem he wrote.

And I'm here to suggest that our institutions, too, gather their courage and face their faults, voice their limitations, and, for the sake of all of our children, flatten their egos and begin to build form that level surface, rather that on the tangled heap of accolades, traditions, assumptions, and long-held beliefs over which we now stumble. I hope that they understand that, as good as they are, they are not the institutions they hope to be if another day passes without serious, undivided attention paid to the students whose progress is, at least for the moment, nothing to boast about. Last June I was flipping through our fifty-two cable channels wondering if anything was on. I came across a broadcast of our school's graduation ceremony. The more I watched, the worse I felt. I saw student after student stride across that stage, grinning and pumping a fist in the air, but wholly unprepared for the demands of college or professional life. I knew this for a fact because I had participated, as I know I will participate again this year, in sending them off that way. But my choices are too few. I can pass kids who, after one brief semester, have at best, ably begun the process of mastering the skills they need. I can give them the D they asked for on the first day, and thereby play my part in sending them off under prepared. Or I can fail them which will result in nothing more than their having to take this same course, yet again. And what will that accomplish? We still don't know what the course is about.

I am left to wonder, as we talk of standards, how seriously we will take

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them. While we work toward clarifying just what we expect, are we willing to give equal attention to how we will help students who don't meet those standards? Are we willing to put time and money into helping train teachers to work with students who have serious skill deficiencies? Are we willing to hold those teaching positions in high esteem because they require the greatest expertise, or will we continue to give these positions to new teachers? Will

THUG LIFE

BY VERNON HILL

My story is about three teenagers who commit their lives to all-pro basketball and struggle with *school life* and *thug life*.

Everyday we see the same ol' s——. All we can do is ask God why he puts us in these positions, why we s¡ee and do things we shouldn't. Were we made to be basketball players or thugs? There is no escaping the thug life. Everywhere you go, everywhere you look, everyone in your family is a thug and have been trapped in the thug life. You can't deny it.

The school life is a whole different story. School makes the three teenagers feel weird, like it's a whole different world. I mean, some thugs, gangbangers, were in school but they didn't stay because they fought. Or they stopped coming because they would rather stay out and sell drugs. Our struggle was to try to forget the thugs and try to go someplace big like the NBA.

Let me tell you about myself. My name is Vernon and I have some special talents in sports. It runs in my family. I like the support the fans give me. But I'm not big time. But I got fans and they ask me, why don't I play for school? And that question is hard to answer. Another thing is, I have a problem with a lot of things, like people who distract me from my work. It is already hard to complete it. I have a problem with life period.

Let me tell you about my cousin. His name is Jaron. He's a little younger than me, but his skill in basketball is more advanced than some others in his grade level because I made him play with people I play with that are older than me. Jaron is an ok guy. H e doesn't start trouble. To me, I think he's the only one who is going to make it. (Shhh . . . Don't tell nobody.) If he doesn't like you, he'll take it out on the court rather than the street.

My mother's cousin, Jimmy, is a real true thug. He doesn't care about nothing at all. Once our best and close friend died, it was just hard to adapt to this school life. I think he's going to give up basketball because he doesn't care about it no more. He plays to play, but he has to. It's our only way out. There are two ways to make it out of the ghetto: die or hit the lottery and move out.

Once school started, things got off on the bad hand. Already Jimmy and Vernon was just too cool in class to do work, trying to impress the girls. It's like a trap. The only things these two cared about was gangbanging, basketball, money and girls, because that's all we know.

Jaron is the only one that is serious about his school work. He found himself a tutor an said he was getting his priorities right. I guess he got tired of hearing Uncle Carlos' " wake" stories or "these niggas ain't going nowhere" lectures. So he started to do his work. The other two, though, are still goofing around, staying out all night, not even thinking about school tomorrow.

Basketball tryouts at school are today and the three of us are so happy to tryout. Jaron is not worried at all once they step in the gym. The coach sees the three got a little potential, so he says, "Let's start the scrimmage." Jimmy and Vernon feel so good they play like an all-star team even though they have hangovers. The coach says the only thing these three need to work on is school work and attitudes. Only one out of the pack made the team. The other two had to go on "study table" until the grades come up. So they found a tutor and tried to get their priorities right, because if they don't keep their grades up, they were gone. So they have to make a change, either the hood or school. So they stayed up all night wondering what should they do? So Jaron made up his mind. Then Vernon and Jimmy said "F—— basketball." They had to wait to hear Jaron convince them that the hood ain't shit but a misplaced dream. The evil of money had these two whipped. Jaron went on all night saying, "Y'all some stupid mother f——ers," and so on. In the morning, Jimmy and Vernon decided to take the full ride for the scholarship and do work, but they didn't leave the hood alone at all.

Vernon was a senior, Jimmy was a junior, Jaron, a freshman. If Vernon was to fail and not get a scholarship, it hurts slowly but surely. If Jimmy was to fail and not leave the hood alone and doesn't do his work and develop his game, he would be a waste of good talent. If Jaron was not to do his work and complete his courses, it would be a downfall for the whole family and the younger kids who looked up to us.

I didn't make it. Jimmy still has another year. And I'm not going to let Jaron mess up because he's the one of us whose going to go on. I'm going to make sure if I don't make it, one of us will.

Everyone in our family had a chance, and let it slip through their hands.

VERNON HILL is a graduate of Evanston Township High School in suburban Chicago. He writes from his heart.

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we start early enough to make a real difference? I ask, because what my Survey kids needed from us, we should have provided long ago. So I want to know, are we willing to do away with this course, at least as it now stands as a last-minute, damage-control device? Are we, as President Clinton recently called for, willing to stop the practice of "social promotion" and deal straight-forwardly with students' deficiencies and our own?

I want to make it clear that these practices do not continue because good, hard-working, well-intentioned people haven't tried to make change. They have. And they keep at it. And there are programs in our school which do make amazing gains with so-called students placed at risk. But we are only as good as our weakest courses. We still tend to respond to kids' needs with what we call plans and initiatives, when we ought to be rolling up our sleeves to do the messy work of disassembling the core beliefs and unchallenged assumptions in which courses like Survey have their root. We have to nag ourselves and each other incessantly with questions of purpose and direction.

It's hard work, and it's discomfiting and sometimes painful. But our children, all of our children, are our priority, not our own comfort. Lasting comfort will come with the knowledge that we are doing our best, every day, for every child.

After 12 years as a teacher, I remain firmly convinced, because I have seen no evidence to the contrary, that every student who sits in my classroom wants to learn and grow and become an important and valued member of society. I believe they are waiting for me to learn to teach them well. I work outward from that premise.

There is one week left to this semester, and when it ends so will this class. And Jane Addams' question pesters me still, now in this form: "How did you respond to the dreams of *these* youth?" And again the answer has to be, I responded with what I did today, this semester, with each one of my kids. And I'm not proud.

I scan the room today with my mind's eye and the image of this group of Survey kids—Annie, Juan, Alfie, Vernon, and all the rest—each with his own struggles, anxieties, resentments, misconceptions, clear insights, talents and good humor are already fading; and, like a dissolve in a movie, indistinct shadows, speculations on the new group, my second semester crew, have begun to replace them. I know that Addams' challenge will return yet again and if the new kids are lucky and I'm strong enough, I can hope to reply by saying, this time with more clarity, honesty, substance and pride than ever before, that I responded to the dreams of these youth with what I did today.

From Scraps to Dreams

When I found my roots of my heritage,
I sought my pride.
My glory of destiny was my fulfilling ride.
I found my dreams and many new journeys.
Enigmas and labyrinths of many seas.
In school teachers and talents opened my door,
In order for me to create my future
And see what's in store.
I found who I am that everyone can see.
A conspicuous talented man that's me.
I showed them my art, poetry, and creativity.
I solved, worked out problems, and showed
Them continuity.
Among all of this hid my sadness and rage.
The times of the past hid at this age.
Until there came a time when all hell
Broke loose.
When ire and anger gave wrath a boost.
I exploded in strife and took it on friends.
I knew, somehow I had to find these ends.
The last of my animosity will come very soon.
For now my lion inside sleeps and I resume.
Right where I began, at the bottomless pits.
Where nothing became everything because
Of my wits.
In time I will heel my patriot wounds.
My triumph on reaching the top will come very soon.

BY CARLOS DIAZ

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Mark Larson is a Golden Apple award-winning teacher at Evanston Township High School in suburban Chicago. He is the author of two books on education.

To the Honorable Judge Green . . .

BY LISA KENNER

To the Honorable Judge Green,

I am writing this letter to attest to the character of Alonzo Jones, a student I have worked with for almost five years. I first met Alonzo in the fall of 1992 when I was volunteering in the daily literacy project in the alternative school, now named the Nancy B. Jefferson School, housed in the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center. During that time I spent much time in the company of this young man and grew to know his temperament, attitude, and potential quite well. Not only did Alonzo dramatically increase his reading level, he also exhibited the desire for positive adult role models in his life.

In the spring of 1994 I was hired as primary teacher in Project B.U.I.L.D. Project B.U.I.L.D., based in the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center, is a program designed to reduce the recidivism rate through workshops, class sessions, and individual counseling. As the primary teacher in Project B.U.I.L.D., I have had the opportunity to work with hundreds of detainees in the last four years. Alonzo is a student whose attitude and behavior have grown to an outstandingly positive and mature level in this program. In fact Alonzo was truly an anchor student in our program, serving as a role model for both students and a source of inspiration for the staff.

I have had opportunity to see Alonzo in the classroom, in unstructured recreational settings, and in counseling. Alonzo is a young man who uses his voice to question and analyze. Respectful of authority and willing to follow rules, Alonzo demonstrated a positive attitude and responsible conduct in the school. He had learned to speak up when he heard negative choices or beliefs leading group consensus. He had become a cooperative teacher assistant as well as a thoughtful, insightful student. Alonzo's sense of empathy for others was useful in developing a sense of responsibility in classroom relationships. In fact Alonzo made a tremendous impact in the life of a younger detainee whom he tutored in reading for approximately six months. Adopting a big brother role with this then eleven year old child, Alonzo's empathy and nurturing skills were dramatically revealed. Meeting twice a week with this younger child Alonzo not only tutored him in reading (together they devoured countless Dr. Seuss books and short stories) but counseled him in managing conflict and anger. In fact this younger child's home room teacher marveled at the progress he made not only in reading, but also in his behavior and cooperation with others.

After Alonzo transferred to Cook County Jail I have maintained weekly contact with him through visits, phone calls, and letters. For the many months that Alonzo has been housed in Division One, he has maintained his dignity, keen vision of positive future goals, and willingness to read, write, and explore his intellectual and spiritual life. Frequently he asks how his former reading student is faring and whether he can continue to help or guide him. Alonzo speaks frequently of completing his education and moving on to a productive future.

Alonzo is a likeable person, having strengthened his awareness of consequences of actions, communications skills, and self-responsibility. Recently I have started a new position working with young adults on the south side of Chicago with a non-profit agency. The community service projects and established mentoring relationships thrive on the energy and involvement of young adults such as he. Alonzo Jones had developed and utilized the reflective process vital to the redirectioning of a young person's life. Certainly Alonzo has the ability, will, and support to recycle his past experiences to the benefit of the greater community. I have nothing but the greatest confidence in this young man. Please contact me if I can be of further assistance.

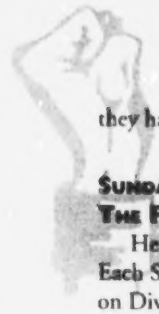
Respectfully,
Elizabeth Kenner
Educator

THE WAITING PLACE

You have a collect call from . . .
'Alonzo' . . . This is a call from a correctional institution. . . . This call is subject to being recorded and monitored. . . . Will you accept these charges? . . . If so, please dial one now or clearly say 'Yes' after the tone. . . . (beep) . . . Your response was not understood. . . . If you will pay for the call from . . . 'Alonzo' . . . please dial one now or hold for operator assistance. . . . Please hold for operator assistance.

"You have a collect call from Alonzo at Cook County Jail, will you accept it?"
"Yes I will."
"Please go ahead."
snap . . . crackle . . . beep . . .
'Ms. Kenner?'
"Zo? Hi, sweetie, how are you doing today?"
'I'm straight. . . .

And so our weekly call ensues, as



they have for seventeen months now.

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Sunday, January 12
The Power of the Living Word

He joined a Bible study group. Each Sunday a group of the older guys on Division One, Deck 3H get together to testify, read the Living Word, and pray for families, loved ones, trials, sentencing dates, and the departed. Zo is the youngest member in this study group, the youngest man on the deck.

'Can you hear them praying? They're in the day room.'
"Yeah, I hear some voices. I don't want you to miss, you wanna call me afterwards?"
'Nah, I've been praying all day.'
"Yeah? What's been going on?"
'Some ole same ole.'

Behind the thick hum of his voice through the line I can hear other voices echoing in a den of din. I've asked him to describe the area in which he has lived for seventeen months. Division One. The Maximum Security Building of the eleven which constitute Cook County Jail, 26th and California, "County." Division One is the oldest building, known as the ghetto of County Jail. Most guys held there are fighting murder cases. Each division building is divided into different decks, stacked on top of each other. There are fifty guys on this desk. Two men to a cell, the cells facing each other down a long hall way which leads to the day room. The day room contains a TV and two pool tables. One of the pool tables was just crushed during a fight. There are two phones on one wall of the day room. When Zo and I talk I can hear the tones of other conversations taking place next to him. When he needs to write down a phone number or address he searches for a pen, a hotly contested and highly valuable piece of property on the inside.

'Hey, gimme a pen. Man, lemme see that pen.'

There is an edge in his voice as he requests a pen. I can hear the little kid inside this young man. Each phone call is limited to fifteen minutes. Time spent finding a pen shaves time off conversation with someone other than the fifty *hardlegs*, male inmates, he faces everyday. This is the third deck Zo has graced since being transferred from the Juvenile Detention Center. Only now that he is on this deck does he tell me more pointedly about the other ones. He says he's in a better place. The doors on the cells lock at night. I assume that is a further blow to the soul. He assures me it's better. He can rest at night now. His first deck was called *Gladiator School* because of the amount of *shanks*, homemade knives, that guys carried. Shanks are created by filing the point of the white metal beams that criss-cross and hold up the ceiling tiles, or by breaking off the head of a toothbrush and whittling a point. Night was the worst time. In County many guys sleep during the day and stay up at night. That's when you have to keep one eye open to make sure no one is popping your door, shank in hand, taking care of nation or personal business. He knew he was in trouble when he saw guys putting paperbacks behind their jumpsuit bibs. Homemade armor.

The next deck that Zo stayed on was more dangerous because he got into it with the *shot caller*. The *shot caller* is the guy on the deck for a specific gang. Zo is a member of the Black Disciple Nation. As a BD he is required to adhere to the directives of the deck's BD *shot caller*. After five years of incarceration Zo has maintained his individuality in spite of the correctional system, the gang's hierarchy, and an uncertain future. When this BD with *juice*, power, ordered Zo to donate *commissary*, jail house merchandise such as shampoo, chips, cigs, as his nation's taxes, Zo refused. Disputing a *shot caller's* authority results in a *violation*, a beating prescribed by one and enforced by a few. Zo's rebellion made his situation tenuous. He refused to accept the *violation*. So he had to watch his back not only for *opposition*, enemy gangs, but also from his own. He never shared any of this with me while he was facing it. Only from the telephone on the new deck does he explain what happened.

"Do you feel safer there?"
'. . . *(quiet laugh)*'
"Is that a stupid question?"
'Yeah.'

—This call is from a correctional facility.—

The automated, pearly pure female voice cuts through our dialogue. Seven minutes into every call we are reminded who is who and what is what. The first time I heard this sound bite I was shocked, and broke my stride. Now Zo and I pause the necessary six seconds and continue from mid sentence or thought as if nothing had interrupted us.

This new deck is full of older guys. Guys with grey in their hair. Guys with grandchildren. Guys whose adolescence is far behind them. Zo explains that this makes daily life more bearable. The decks that house the younger guys, those twenty-one and under, are more volatile and prone to continual upset. He explains that if something were to *kick off*, a fight erupt, it would be much more serious on this deck. But the frequency of disputes is much lower. Is it safer? Well that would be a stupid thing to say. Zo heard about the guy who hung himself in his cell two nights ago.

"Do you ever feel like doing that?" I query in my best empathetic tone, inwardly cringing.
'I'm going home one day,' he replies.
—*You have one minute remaining.*—
That damn lady's voice again. Enough time left to refrain the obligatory "keep your head up" and "stay in touch."
"Professor Jones, I love you. I'll talk to you soon."
'Me too, Ms. Kenner. Tell the fat cats I *say Hi.*'
—click—

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SATURDAY, JANUARY 25

THE CIRCLE OF POWER

This was a special call. Zo and I had planned it. It was a surprise call to Zo's and my friend, Leila, on her birthday. Leila and I had both taught Zo back in 1992 at the Juvenile Detention Center. We were having a birthday party at her mother's house. Sipping red wine, gazing at blue candles, awaiting our guests in this cozy Lincoln Park home we heard the phone ring.

You have a collect call from ... 'Alonzo' ... This is a call from a correctional institution... institution ... This call is subject to being recorded and monitored ... Will you accept these charges? ... If so, please dial one now or clearly say 'Yes' after the tone... (beep) ... Your response was not understood... If you will pay for the call from ... 'Alonzo' ... please dial one now or hold for operator assistance... Please hold for operator assistance.

"You have a collect call from Alonzo at Cook County Jail, will you accept it?"

"Yes I will."

"Please go ahead."

'Leila?'

"Alonzo!? Omigod! I can't believe it. What are you doing?"

'Just chillin. Your party sounds pretty dead. (chuckles)'

After Leila and Zo had chatted for a few minutes, she passed the phone just in time for me to hear...

This call is from a correctional facility.

I realize how Zo and I have really learned the "jailphonejab." Zo rarely calls with stream of consciousness parlance. Rather, I must ask him questions, beckoning information from which I knit a glimpse of his daily reality at 2600 South California. If you don't know the questions to ask, it can be a painfully slow, silence filled phone call.

I ask about his *cellies*, roommates, his Bible Study, if he's talked to Father Kelley, seen other students I knew from Audy, heard about his family, been reading any books, noticed the phase of the moon, gone to *commissary*, written any poetry, witnessed any drama, seen the dentist about his aching molar, spoken to his lawyer.

He asks if I've heard from Anton, Danielle, Andrew, Robert, Tom. All former class members with Zo in the Audy Home, a.k.a. the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center. Anton is out on probation, Danielle is still in Audy, Andrew recently returned to County, Robert paroled out, Tom is serving 70 years in Menard. I share the triumphs and failures of his friends as vividly as possible in hopes for preparing him for the day when he too will be carving his post-incarceration path. I take great pains to elaborate on the trials and errors of young people directing their lives. The fits of depression, the running away, the subsequent arrests, the job interviews, the college applications, the pregnancies, the fighting with parents, the glories of independent living, of grocery shopping and cooking for one's self.

'I cook in here, Ms. Kenner.'

"Yeah, right."

'True that. We call the water box in the bathroom the kitchen. When you let the water run hot, the pipes get to burnin. Slap some butter on the top, fry up some lunch meats from commissary, and put it on some crackers. I cook up in here.'

He asks what I taught in class that day. He asks how the fat cats are. He asks how the car is running. He asks how Olivia, Leila's daughter, is, and if we're still spoiling her. He asks me to contact his attorney to ask about a possible plea bargain. He asks me to call his sister with his visiting information.

He advises me on how to conduct myself when doing home visits in the Robert Taylor Homes.

'You shouldn't go there anyway. but I know you are. Make a lot of noise when you walk in the stairwells. Or they're going to think you're the police. Be careful, Ms. Kenner.'

(I tell Zo later that I sing up and down the stairwells, feigning nonchalance, clinging to vicarious street savvy. He is amused.)

Zo and I negotiate our roles constantly. Spinning from friend to advocate to informant to student to teacher. He fills me in on information only he can glean. I respond with action steps that only someone *on the bricks*, in the free world, can take. I am impressed with the way he receives and disseminates information.

You can get so confused
that you'll start in to a race
down long wiggled roads at a break-necking pace
and grind on for miles across weirdish wild space
headed, I fear, toward a most useless place.
The waiting Place ... for people just waiting.

Waiting for a train to go
or the mail to come, or a plane to go
or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow
or waiting around for a Yes or No
or waiting for their hair to grow.
Waiting perhaps for Uncle Jake
or a pot to boil, or a Better Break
or a string of pearls, or a pair of pants
or a wig with curls, or Another Chance
Everything is just waiting.

Dr. Seuss, *Oh, The Places You'll Go!*

'Andrew's out there wild, Ms. Kenner. He's dealing marijuana and shooting at Kings.'

Andrew, detained for three years at the Audy Home before transferring to CCDOC and being bonded out by his boys, is like a brother to Zo. Classmates for years, growing up together in *Owl shirts*, Audy Home uniform, they have been quite close. Three months have lapsed since I have had contact

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with him. Every week Zo asks me about Andrew's *sect*, specific gang territory. Zo's snitching on him belies concern, not vengeance. Andrew is back in County Jail, bond revoked at his last court date. Zo says he's not surprised.

'Bob skipped bond and is on the run. I saw Jim today in rec and he said he didn't show for the last day of trial. They all got found guilty.'

"Oh Lord. How is he handling it? Is he okay? How much time is he looking at?"

'I didn't ask. He seemed straight.'

Bob and Jim are both former students who spent years with Zo at Audy. Bob recently made the news as one of Michael Sheahan's five most wanted list. Apprehended at his grandmother's house in the far south suburbs, Bob appeared in the *Tribune* and *Sun Times* in a supremely horrific article. He received eighty-five years. He is eighteen years old now and on close watch at Joliet.

'Ms. Kenner, you should get a hold of Charlie. I saw him last night and he looked bad. Braids all out eyes all wild. I think he's trippin'.'

Charlie, too, is a former student and classmate of Zo who is housed on Division One. After surviving an alleged gang rape on deck he is close to the mental edge. He is still awaiting trial. We exchanged letters once. Zo is right. He is trippin'.

'This stud on my deck has his little brother over at Audy. You think you could find him and talk to him? He's really going through a thing over there and this stud is worried about him. He needs some Bible in his life. The stud writes letters, but never gets one back. He don't know if they're getting through.'

Zo introduces me to "this stud" during one Monday night. He's receiving a visit from his mother and minister at the time. Zo and "this stud" watch as we three on one side of the glass connect, exchange numbers, and make plans. Zo facilitates a referral.

'Big D just got transferred to the deck above mine. We talk at night through the tiles. He said wassup. His play sister goes to Phillips. He asked you to holler at her if you can. Maybe get her into something positive.'

Big D, yet another former students and classmate of Zo's is still awaiting trial. In fact it turns out that I am currently teaching Big D's sister unbeknownst to any of us. Another referral. Nice job, Zo.

I feel responsible for catching him up with the events in the outer world. Sometimes our most comforting and casual talks revolve around the TV. Sometimes we watch snippets of "Soul Train" together on the phone. There are no radios or tape players at County. The Saturday morning "Soul Train" show and "Friday Night Jukebox" are the only sources of music. When we talk Zo tells me what he can see on the TV in the dayroom and I flip to the same channel. This gives us a sense of continuity. We watch the channel seven news together. He is glad that they caught the west side rapist. Together we watch a man led through cameras and reporters to the courtroom.

'That is messed up.'

"The media are vultures, aren't they."

'He's gonna get treated.'

"There's a lot of pressure on that judge. He'll probably get slammed."

'*Man, there's some sick fools in this world.*'

Yet again my assumption misses. Predicting empathy with another man facing a serious charge, I am surprised by Zo yet again. Sex crimes and violent crimes against *shorties*, young kids, or the elderly are shame crimes. This guy is going to be treated on the inside. Justice is swift. Murder in the gang-driven drug trade is accepted as a given. But these other crimes are seen as atrocities. The complexity of in-house ethics is worthy of sophisticated research. Outside of prison walls inmates are branded with the horror of their crime, while on the inside this is but one of many identifying factors. Zo is accused of first degree murder. We never discuss his case. I don't ask such questions. Yet and still his role in the Audy Home community reflected much more than what one would attribute to an alleged murderer. Whatever that means.

Zo was arrested when he was fourteen years old and subsequently spent four and a half years in the Audy Home awaiting a quick and speedy trial. Charge him as an adult or a juvenile? Charge him with First Degree Murder or Manslaughter? Appeal or plea bargain? The barrage of issues surrounding his case are dwarfed only by the number of individuals entering and exiting his life as attorneys, psychologists, counselors, teachers, judges, et al. Meanwhile court date after court date rolls on. Appear in court. The state needs more time. Continuance. Appear in court. The defense needs more time. Continuance. The judge is ill. Continuance. The arresting officer moved to Milwaukee. The state needs more time to contact him. Continuance. Meanwhile clocks turn into calendars.

Trees burst into bloom. Blue skies prevail and temperatures soar. Leaves start to dip and fahrenheit slip. Autumn gales beat on the fireproof, safety glass window of Section 4C, room 2. Winter storms rage and snow leaves trickles. Thaw melts the grey ice and birds fly and squirrels creep and ice skates sleep. Four times this season cycle revolves as the courts argue pre-trial rulings. All the while this fourteen year old is revolving as well.

All the while Zo is bursting and blooming and prevailing and soaring and dipping and slipping and beating and raging and trickling and melting and flying and creeping and sleeping. All movement to four levels of this large

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building at 1100 South Hamilton. Except for cursory hours in the enclosed, eternally in construction atrium yard, Zo grows to manhood behind white painted steel and security glass. When he is eighteen and a half years old the judge decides to send him to Cook County Jail to await trial. There is still no ruling of guilt or innocence.

Sunday, February 16
Glasses

You have a collect call from . . . 'Alonzo' . . . This is a call from a correctional institution. . . . This call is subject to being recorded or monitored . . . Will you accept these charges? . . . If so, please dial one now or clearly say 'Yes' after the tone.
"Yes"
—beep—
"Thank you."
"Zo, hey hon. How are you doing?"
'I'm straight.'

I am surprised to receive a call tonight, because I have just returned from visiting him. County Jail has weekly visiting days depending on division and deck. Calling the inmate index, 1-800-425-JAIL, will allow you such specifics. Mondays have been his day for over a year now. After work, around 5pm, I board the Damen #50 bus heading south until I transfer to the #75 Blue Island bus heading west. Snapping the bus bell cord as we approach California Avenue, I bound down the four padded steps and hit my stride as I pass the Popeye's Chicken on the corner. I see a man on the bus bench tearing apart a breast of chicken, cupping the bright red yellow and blue paper plate with his knees. "Slow down, homes," an onlooker laughs. "They don't feed you shit in there," replies the man, chicken crumbling out of his eager mouth. I keep walking south on California past the dingy and foreboding courthouse proper until I arrive at the driveway announced by the Cermak Health Services sign.

A sheriff requests my picture ID. She asks me if I'm carrying a beeper, a cell phone, sharp instrument, or drugs. I reply no. She removes my *Sun Times* from under my arm. "No newspapers inside." Around me I see faces in a range of emotions—fatigue, frustration and boredom. Bond court is located next to Division One and I see people I imagine to be parents and lovers and brothers awaiting the prescribed four hours for the rebirth of a citizen from the iron gates. Passing Checkpoint One I continue down the curving road avoiding speed bumps and crusing squad cars. I wind my way to the buckled and worn marble steps to the majestic wooden door and arching window of Division One. Using all my upper strength I pull open the portal to job a two tiered staircase. I tap on the reinforced window of a supremely old and heavy steel door. A handsome man in a midnight blue polyester sheriff's outfit uses the warlock key to decipher and open this final door. After checking my ID and asking me to spit out my gum, he sends me to a line of fellow weary, evening visitors standing in front of a bulletproof glass counter.

Tapping her Merit 100 in a flimsy, old ashtray underneath a No Smoking sign sits a robust young woman in similarly odd-fitting sherif's uniform, inscribing visitor's name, address, and relationship next to the inmate's name in a log book. I enjoyed the delayed moment of confusion as I answer "teacher" to the relationship question. Nosily peering at the other entries I see family, friend, minister. She scribbles "friend" next to Zo's Inmate ID number, hands me a visitor's pass throught the open six inches at the base of the window, and shoos me off to be searched. I proceed down the hall and enter the first door on my right. Accustomed to the routine I empty my pockets, remove my shoes and take off my coat. A cursory brush over my body including snapping my underwire bra and the less than thorough yet completely intrusive search is complete. She hands me a laminated index card with 16 written in red ink as my property tag. She takes my keys, book bag, matches, and cigs and starts to walk away. As I bend down to replace my shoes, she slips the pen out of my pony-tail and chastises "no pens allowed."

"Sorry, I forgot it was there." She seems unimpressed.

I return to the front waiting room, plop down on a blue plastic bench next to pay phones and await my turn. I look around and see babies dressed like dolls, toddlers with fantastic footgear, bored pre-teens, decked out teenage girls, dozing older women, brass-talking young men among us. Complaints about the length of time waiting and comments on the weight of bulbous sheriffs bending over to snatch Lorna Doone butter cookies out of the vending machines are broadcast unabashedly. To see six sheriffs casually eating take out dinners while reviewing ID's and talking on the phone is an ironic slap in the face. Two hundred feet away inmates and loved ones are being located on deck to be brought for the thirty minute non-contact visit. One person's displeasure at working overtime meets the emotions that we, those connected to County inmates, experience awaiting our visit. So many levels of attitude in one simple room. Jails are callous.

Ten minutes of people watching. "Visit for Jones," a blue shirt bellows. I jump up and return to the aforementioned hallway. Led into Area A I see a familiar profile. Behind the smeared glass I see Zo standing, peering to find a vacant set of stools for us. He stands behind a row of twelve men in matching khaki CCDOC jumpers hunched on stools talking through small round microphoned screens the size of sink drains. I offer my biggest smile and meet him by the glass, two stools away from the end of the line. It is really loud with everyone trying to be heard over each other. Some women are screaming at their men about receiving calls from other women. Some babies are crying. Some twenty-something men are sharing a gut-wrenching laugh across the glass. Some grandmothers are shaking their heads in loving consternation. And then there's Zo and me. We exchange our tried and true ritual.

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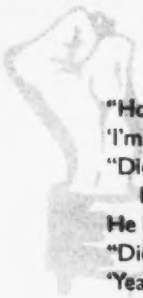

"How are you doing Zo-dee-Zo?"
'I'm straight.'
"Did you get a new jumper? You're looking fresher than me, as usual."
He laughs. 'Nah, I just washed it today.'
"Did you get a haircut?"
'Yeah, the barber rolled through today.'

We start at the basics and work our way inwards. All the while all eyes rove. This thirty minute weekly visit will provide the substance of tales and gossip and networking back on deck. Some guy in khaki whistles over at another dud four stools down. He looks up, smiles and waves. A lovely woman on my side of the glass waves back.

'That's his cellie,' Zo explains. Zo has spent years of interpreting gang culture and mysterious behavior for me. He intuits my points of conclusion. I get a glance of the bustling social network on the other side. A sheriff with a clipboard notifies inmates when their thrity minutes is up and they must return down the *Boulevard*, the underground tunnel connecting the deck and the visiting room, to replay scenarios in cells.

"This your lady, man?" a dude with grey braids winks at Zo as he stands up from the stool.
'Nah, this is my teacher.'
"Your teacher? Well I'll be damned. Wanna teach me a thing or two?"

He laughs and looks one more time at his visitors leaving before heading down the hallway.
'Get out of here, man.'
Before long, the sheriff taps Zo.
'Ms. Kenner, I gotta go.'
"Okay, sweetie, take care of yourself. And for God's sake, pick up a book."

He laughs, stands, and hits the door to the *Boulevard*. I reverse the spiral of entry. Picking up my property, returning my visitor's pass, gladly scurrying down the stairs as I break into fresh night air. I light a cigarette, strolling back to Checkpoint One. Flashing my ID again I am free. Fresh air tastes so good after even a moment of County. I reach the bus stop before I realize I left my glasses inside the visitor's room. "Damnit!" I rewind my way back through the labyrinth to find them in the clenched fist of a toddler amusing himself with the percussive timbre of Lenscraft frame meeting County stool stem as his mother communes with a man on the other side of the glass. "Excuse me," I say and pick my specs out of his hand. He looks up at me in surprise, and I head out again. Without thinking I light another cig on the curving road to the front gate. Fresh air tastes good. Where's the damn bus?
'Some stud said my O.G. left her glasses in the visiting room.'
"Yeah, I dorked out. But I got them back."
'Just making sure. Okay well they're calling us in.'
"Okay, hon. Good night. Talk to you soon."
—click—

Phones turn off automatically at 9:30 PM. This coincides with lock-down for the night. I sit looking at the phone reciever. O.G. Old Girl. Slang for mom.

SUNDAY, MARCH 2
COURT CALL

You have a collect call from ... 'My court date' ...This is a call from a correctional institution....This call is subject to being recorded and monitored....Will you accept the charges? ... If so, please dial one now or clearly say 'yes' after the tone.... (beep) ...Your response was not understood.... If you will pay for the call from....'My court date' ... please dial one now or hold for operator assistance. ... Please hold for operator assitance. ...The party calling you has hung up.

You have a collect call from ... *Monday March'* ...This is a call from a correctional institution....This call is subject to being recorded and monitored. ...Will you accept the charges? ... If so, please dial one now or clearly say 'yes' after the tone.... (beep) ...Your response was not understood.... If you will pay for the call from ... *'Monday March'* ... please dial one now or hold for operator assistance.... Please hold for operator assistance. ...The party calling you has hung up.

You have a collect call from ... *'3rd Calendar'* ...This is a call from a correctional institution....This call is subject to being recorded and monitored....Will you accept the charges? ... If so, please dial one now or clearly say 'yes' after the tone.... (beep) ...Your response was not understood. ...If you will pay for the call from ... *'3rd Calendar'* ... please dial one now or hold for operator assitance.... Please hold for operator assistance.... The party calling you has hung up.

You have a collect call from ... *'602 Judge Green'* ...This is a call from a correctional institution....This call is subject to being recorded and monitored....Will you accept the charges? ... If so, please dial one now or clearly say 'yes' after the tone.... (beep) ...Your response was not understood.... If you will pay for the call from ... *602 Judge Green'* ... please dial one now or hold for operator assitance.... Please hold for operator assistance....The party calling you has hung up.

You have a collect call from... *'9 am'*... This is a call from a correctional institution....This call is subject to being recorded and monitored.... Will you accept the charges?... If so, please dial one now or clearly say 'yes' after the tone.... (beep)... Your response was not understood ... If you will pay for the call from... *'9 am'*... please dial one now or hold for operator assistance.... Please hold for operator assistance ...The party calling you has hung up.

You have a collect call from... *'Thanks'*. ..This is a call from a correctional institution....This call is subject to being recorded and monitored.... Will you accept the charges? ... If so, please dial one now or clearly say 'yes' after the tone.... (beep) ... Your response was not under-

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stood.... If you will pay for the call from ... *'Thanks'* ... please dial one now or hold for operator assitance. ... Please hold for operator assistance.... The party calling you has hung up.

My answering machine light is blinking deliriously. I wonder how I could have accrued so many calls. As I sit down, pen and pad in hand, I hear message after message from County. Unable to reach me in person Zo left the information piece after piece, beep after beep. Nonetheless I am unable to attend court that day. I wish I could let him know so he won't be waiting in vain. But I can't. County is a waiting place. Life in the liminal is not for the faint of heart.

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SUNDAY, APRIL 13
GOLDEN BIRTHDAY

You have a collect call from...'Alonzo' ...This is a call from a correctional institution....This call is subject to being recorded and monitored.... Will you accept these charges? ... If so, please dial one now or clearly say 'yes' after the tone.
"Yes."
"Thank you."
"Zo? I'm so glad to hear from you."
"What's going on, Ms. Kenner?"
"What's going on with you, my friend?"
"I guess I'm adjusting."

His voice sound so distant, so quiet. Unknown has become known. After ten days of intake processing in Joliet Correctional Center, Zo has arrived at his last correctional facility—Logan, that he shall face before heading home. If all goes as planned. He took a *cop out*, pleading guilty for reduced sentencing, and will complete his sentence in twelve months. His voice sounds so different.

"Is it better down there?"
"I guess so."

Cook County Jail is alleged to be the worst part of an individual's transit through the correctional system. Overcrowding, the pressure of awaiting verdicts, the lack of schooling, resources, movement, employment, and hope contribute to its reputation. In the penitentiaries individuals know the finiteness or eternity of their sentences. A blessing or a curse. For Zo, Logan Correctional Center is the last stop. But something in his voice worries me.

"So tell me, hon. What's it like? What have you been doing?"
"I just got out of intake. I've been in the room for ten days while they tested me to see where to put me."

●●●

All Alone!
Whether you like it or not,
Alone will be something
you'll be quite a lot.
And when you're alone, there's a very good chance
you'll meet things that scare you right out of your pants.
There are some, down the road between hither and yon,'
that can scare you so much you won't want to go
But on you will go
though the weather be foul.
On you will go
though your enemies prowl.
Onward up many a frightening creek,
though your arms may get sore
and your sneakers may leak.

Dr. Seuss
Oh, The Places You'll Go!

Now I begin to understand the remoteness in his voice. Complete disconnection, complete isolation. Perhaps the most injurious part. He says that he hears they can play ball everyday. He can get his GED. The day room is three times bigger than County's. Lock-down happens at 10:30 PM. He can get visits every day. He knows from earlier calls that my car engine exploded, and chances are I won't be able to see him for a while. His family, residing in Englewood visited him three times while he was in County in Chicago, Illinois. Chances are they won't be able to see him in Logan in Lincoln, Illinois either.

He says the food is better. He says he hasn't talked to any of the other guys yet. He is still watching and learning. He says that he's going to join the five-man church choir. He says that he's wearing the facility-dispensed "girls slippers" until they process his property. I make a mental note to look into getting him some new shoes. He says that he's going to be home by his twenty-first birthday. I ask him what he wants for his birthday feast. He laughs and pauses.

"Fried chicken and corn. I love corn, real corn. You know."
"Yeah, I know. On the cob, huh?"
"Yeah, I guess."
"You've got a lot to figure out down there, huh?"

I slip into my counselor role.

LISA KENNER is a long-time teacher and activisit in Chicago. She is currently teaching at the Triumphant Charter school in Chicago. At the time this piece was printed whe was working with project B.U.I.L.D.

student poetry

Outcasts

The silence of the sage minds stay silent
no longer.
And the dead that emerged
From his sanity had risen once again.
This feeling morphed into an outcast
That now roams the city.
He lingers through the urban kingdom
of orphas who fell from their thrones
just like him.
This is his new domain.
His garden in which he
bequeaths for inappropriate mischief.
This devious soul is now
a vagabond of the silent emerald city.
And now he wanders
through the heartless lands
that once took his sageness
and amended it into sanity.
This silence of extinct sage
is now hybernating
because of the soul
that his spirit imprisons.

by Carlos Diaz

Carlos Diaz is sixteen and lives in the Back of the Yards neighborhood in Chicago. In addition to poetry, Carlos enjoys drawing, acting and grafitti writing.

Old Baby Girl

We're too old for our age.
We bear children and try to raise them.
We work and support.
We cry over death.

We're too old for our age.
We die for our family and friends, not for a cause.
We live in air that has bullets flying.
We cannot go out to play.

We're too old for our age.
We deal drugs and steal cars.
We write a will the day of our birth.
We live in slums, ghettos . . . in hell.

We're too old for our age.
We choose our own route in life.
We try to beat the odds.
We live to succeed, but we never achieve.

We're still too old for our age.
And we know when we're born we begin
to die.

by Nichol Vargas

Nichol Vargas likes to write and perform poetry because it gives her a fresh way to be heard. She was the president of her high school's 1998 senior class and was involved in almost every club available.

Can you see through the eyes of a
child? Can you feel what they are
suffering?
Can you hear what their tears are
saying and what the wind is telling
them?

No, you can't

Your adulthood has taken away the gift
of being a child and that which
must be taken very good care.
They're not mentally sick.
They're not dumb.
They're not stupid.
They are children.
There is no mistake as big as your
judgement
that compares all the things
you have done to them

Now they are getting back
and you are the one whose afraid now.

by Christine De la Vega

Cristina De La Vega's quest to make the world a better place is reflected in her poetic pursuits. Cristina keeps herself busy by working on the school newspaper, producing videos for video club and translating for the *Immigrant Survival Guide*.

Welcome

I awake from the silence of time.
My eyes open in a luscious shine!

I see the glare upon my face.
Lord gave me life of a human race.

I see the famine's smurky smile.
I cry and cry for a little while.

This world looks sad.
But all I feel is very glad,
because of God's gift to be
I have a mom just for me.

I thank you lord for my dressing.
I'll pray every night.
I'll say my blessing.

by Carlos Diaz

Illustration by Carlos Diaz

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LIKE A TREE STANDING BY THE WATER

Urban gardeners shall not be moved

BY MELODY ERMACHILD CHAVIS

When we first started STRONG ROOTS, it seemed so good and simple: take kids and dirt, and water, grow food.

Of course, it wasn't that easy

Things were not getting any better in my neighborhood, sinking under a flood of unemployment, crack, and gunfire. Our crime-watch committee is interracial, white families like mine joining black neighbors to see what we can do. When city employee Shyaam Shabaka introduced himself at our meeting, he said his job was to work with youth in our neighborhood. I volunteered to help Shyaam, because I wanted to do something positive, not just call the police, and I was always talking about "prevention," and "early intervention."

At first, I helped Shyaam arrange trips to ball games and museums. When some of the kids put lunch in their pockets to take home for dinner, we talked about the need for food in a neighborhood where so many families run out at the end of the month. The only near supermarket had closed, leaving only the liquor stores selling overpriced milk and overripe bananas as their only produce. We decided to start a garden project.

The kids wanted something to do so badly, if we had suggested fishing or camping, they'd have fished or camped. But Shyaam had worked as an African-American volunteer with a horticulture project in Mali, West Africa, and he had a vision of restoring "the lost agricultural heritage that's rightfully theirs" to the African-American community. He talked about how families had lived on the land only one or two generations ago, and about the negative legacy for agriculture left behind by slavery and sharecropping that had to be overcome. As for me, my own backyard garden was my solace, a place that gave me shelter when the street outside was just too rough.

We only had two things: a group of about ten youths 14-17 years old, and a chance to pay them minimum wage. We found out we could become a job site that provided summer jobs for low-income teens under the Federal Youth Employment and Training Act for high school age kids.

From the beginning, we had our eyes on a vacant lot for our garden. It had a billboard on it that usually advertised alcohol on one side and tobacco on the other, showing black people drinking, smoking, and smiling. Someone dumped a mattress among the weeds and the little kids used it as a trampoline. At night, there was often a card game on the lot, and 24-hours a day, almost any drug could be bought along the sidewalk. Our vision of a garden full of food there took a lot of imagination, but Shyaam and I could see it: whenever I looked at that billboard, I pictured vines growing on it, and hanging from its frame, baskets of produce for sale.

The community-minded owner of the property offered us the ground around the billboard for the price of the county taxes. But in order to start a garden there, we needed money for rent and a fence, and we soon found out we would need non-profit status, liability insurance and a legal lease agreement. I taught myself grant-writing from books.

We decided to act like a garden project even if we didn't have a garden. We took the youths on trips to organic farms and gardens. As they walked among the plants and fruit trees, their faces relaxed. Every place we visited, the kids asked the farmers, "How'd you get a job like this?" Ask the youths what they want, and they always say, "A job." They need money in their pockets for all the things a teenager needs, like clothes, movie tickets, and pizza slices.

Between trips, the kids still so profoundly had nothing to do, that when somebody threw an old sofa out of an apartment building up the block from my house, they slouched on that couch and hung over the back of it for months like it was a life raft.

"At least," I told my husband, "we don't have to worry about our couch potatoes watching too much TV." Most of the sets that once were in their apartments had long since been stolen or sold for dope. Houses where drugs are used are furnished with nothing, and I couldn't see the information highway taking a turn down our block.

Our garden project had plenty of hard times. The umbrella non-profit organization that adopted us folded, stalling our grant applications. Then, on a sunny day, four guys in a car drove by the billboard lot and shot three people right there on the corner. Shyaam arrived on the scene just after the cops did. Shyaam, who didn't want to look, saw one man's body lying bloody on the sidewalk in the noontime sun, an officer trying to resuscitate him, but he died.

Shyaam said, "We need a garden, but we also need to feel safe." We realized we couldn't use the billboard lot.

The only other open space in the neighborhood was one small tot lot where tots never played because everybody knew drug dealers own the place.

We never did find land for a garden that first summer. School finally started and the rains came and soaked the couch and the city hauled its sodden mass away.

If it occurred to either Shyaam or me to give up, we didn't say so to each other. Other urban greeners were our inspiration, like a San Francisco jail deputy, Cathy Sneed, who has been teaching inmates and parolees how to grow vegetables.

"Maybe the youth could just skip the going-to-jail part, and learn to grow food right now," I told Shyaam.

They call themselves "youth." They cringe when called "poor" or "low-income," and they think the word "teenagers" is dumb. They hate euphemisms like "inner-city" and "at-risk."

"At-risk" makes people think of being shot or jailed. Those dangers are real, but every day they are also at risk of anxiety and depression.

When the youths go out of school for summer, 1994, we were ready with jobs. Shyaam had found a rent-free garden plot, already fenced and insured, at a city-owned senior center in a safer place across town. We were disappointed to have to move the garden project to another neighborhood, but we wanted to get started. At first, the seniors weren't so sure about teenagers coming around, but Shyaam and I persuaded them to try us out.

It turned out to be a perfect match: the kids, so hungry for love and attention form adults, and the seniors, eager to teach what they knew about the hobby they loved. We could hardly believe it when Doris, a heavy set lady with a sweet voice, told us she had raised goats as a girl just blocks away. She taught a class for us on traditional African American crops like a squash grown in the South called "Kush," an African word. Albert, who moved stiffly on his bad leg, started all of our first seedlings in cut-open milk cartons on the porch of his tiny apartment.

Fifteen-year-old Charles liked both Albert and Doris right away. Charles was shaky that first summer, because his older sister's boyfriend had just been murdered, and he carried a little frown between his eyes. He seemed uncertain, too, about dirt. "This is nasty," he told Doris. When he signed up with the city jobs program, he had hoped for a carpentry job.

Another of our gardeners, Ernest,

"Maybe the youth could just skip the going-to-jail part, and learn to grow food right now," I told Shyaam.

16, was new to the neighborhood, having just moved with his mother from Mississippi. We were worried about how he would get along with the older kids. He won everyone's respect quickly, not just because he was a good basketball player, but because he was the only one who was already natural with plants, have worked on his grandfather's small farm.

"But I was getting into trouble down South, so my mom brought me out here." It turns out crack, guns and gangs had come to Mississippi, too.

We had crude rules, made up by the youths themselves, posted on the garden fence: "No throwing tools," and "No profanity." A lot of dirt clods, bad language, and a few tools flew the first weeks before we made the sign. "Hey!" Shyaam would call out. "Hey! We don't act that way here!"

He gave his dispute resolution class, and talked about how to say you're sorry. There was so much to learn: not just gardening, but how to show up, be on time, work and keep working, and how to talk to adults with respect.

Luckily, I remembered that adolescence is the push-pull time when responsibility is learned. Even so, more than once I thought about that bumper-sticker, "Hire a teenager while he still knows everything." And I thought about how much easier it is to stay at home and vote for politicians who want to build cells for young people than it is to actually spend time with them.

Doris, who is shorter than most of the kids and walks with a cane, approached them with authority and affection. Watching the kids with her, I realized that the way you learn something like setting out seedlings is by putting your body up close to the body of someone who knows how to do it, and doing it with them.

The kids own this project. They chose its name, STRONG ROOTS, and the slogan, *Gardening for Survival.*

They are just a few of 615,000 of the lowest-income teens in America who were working that summer, each paid $4.25 an hour for 30 hours a week. These Youth Job funds had been in place, although diminishing, since Lyndon Johnson's time. Each of the youths made about $1,000 during the whole summer. Most of them asked Shyaam to keep their money for them so no one at home would take it. At the end of the summer, he took the group to a discount mall where they turned their money into school clothes they wouldn't have had without STRONG ROOTS.

Not everyone stuck with the program. Some had too many problems a

job just couldn't solve, and they dropped out, replaced by other youths from the neighborhood. One day at the end of the first summer, I was driving sixteen-year-old Rainey, one of the few girls to join STRONG ROOTS, to pick up her baby daughter. I asked Rainey if she wanted to come back next year.

"No," she said. "I really didn't like it. The work was too hard." My shoulders slumped a little as I drove, until she added, "Next year, I'm going to see if I can work in a lab or a pharmacy, because I think that's what I'd like to do." I'm certain that Rainey, who'd never cashed a paycheck before STRONG ROOTS, couldn't have aspired to such a job unless she'd had her first one.

The second year of STRONG ROOTS, the police cracked down on several drug houses near the billboard lot, and we went back and cleared the land of two tons of debris and broken glass, and planted it with fruit trees and beds of greens.

The only thing I saved from the pile of trash we raked up was a broken yellow plastic sign: "Caution, Children" with the figure of a running child snapped in two. I put it in my kitchen window, in memory of broken children everywhere. Its bright yellow glow made me think of the robes of a Buddhist monk I'd read of, who ordained trees in Thailand's rain forest. He draped them in saffron yellow robes trying to save them from being cut down. I wondered if I could find someone who could ordain our neighborhood's children as trees. Then maybe people would sit down around them to protect them from being hurt.

STRONG ROOTS has done a lot with a little. The first two years, of the half dozen grant applications I made to foundations and corporations, we got only one: $5,000 from a federally funded substance abuse prevention program, which we used for insurance and equipment. An upscale catalog company gave us tools and local nurseries gave us seeds and soil. We won a roto-tiller in a national community gardens contest.

STRONG ROOTS - *Gardening for Survival* - could also be called *Gardening Against Isolation*, because it connected us to the environmental movement. On Earth Day in our city park, Charles and Ernest - who deal every day with the nervous, averted eyes of people who pass them in the street - sat at our booth soaking up big smiles and friendly inquiries. They got better and better at approaching strangers to explain STRONG ROOTS and to sell raffle tickets for a donated mountain bike.

We were all surprised by how much food we were able to grow: corn, tomatoes, peas, beans, greens. When the youths gave the vegetables to the seniors, everybody felt so good.

"You guys are great!" people kept saying. "What a wonderful project!"

At the end of the day, Charles counted a tall stack of one dollar bills destined for our bank account while Ernest helped me load our booth into the car. They waved goodbye looking proud, the picture of raised self-esteem.

Almost more than jobs, the youths need purpose. At conferences of organic farmers they've met people who live for growing good food. They were the only African-American young people at the sustainable agriculture meetings. "Who are you guys?" people would ask, smiling, eager to hear about their work.

And I got to know Dana, a young woman from the country who is trying to keep the Headwaters forest from being logged. "We're working together," I said, "You're doing preservation, and I'm doing restoration, two halves of the same work."

Dana told me about the Marbled Murrelet, a bird I'd never heard of and probably won't be getting to know. I realized that it's the same act of faith for me to come to love that bird and want to save it sight unseen, as it is for her to love our vacant lot and all that grows there: plants and strangers' children.

We were all surprised by how much food we were able to grow: corn, tomatoes, peas, beans, greens. When the youths gave the vegetables to the seniors, everybody felt so good. At our end-of-the-summer party, the seniors said they had loved being with the young people. Watching them, I thought that what a person really wants to do in life is to find a thing that needs doing, and do it well.

Charles and Ernest found out gardening is what they like to do, and they became our best horticulturalists. They signed up for another summer.

At the end of August, 1996, after our harvest, after the kids had gone back to school, my morning paper printed a small article that said the federal summer jobs program had been an "item" in the rescissions bill and had "died a quiet death" without a eulogy when Bill Clinton signed it. Unable to speak, I handed the paper to my husband, pointing to the bottom of the page.

"Republican sponsors of the budget," he read out loud, "say the program is a failure because it does not lead to permanent employment." The youths are 14-17 years old. "Too bad these politicians aren't still working at whatever *their* first summer jobs were," he fumed. "So much for the idea that they want poor people to work."

At first, I reacted as if I had been working to save a forest, and it had been cut down. I cried to my husband, raged over the phone with my best friend, and called my councilwoman and the mayor. Neither of them had any funding ideas.

What could we say to the youths? I didn't want to tell fragile youngsters that some grownups had just decided to make life even harder for them. I didn't want them to hear even one discouraging word. But I felt flattened by discouragement.

Shyaam, though, didn't even skip a beat. "We saw this coming. Why should we roll over and give up just because some people in Washington want to spend the money on nuclear testing instead? We're just going to find a way to keep on going," he said.

I didn't see how. The nationwide youth jobs program had cost $872 million, much less than one billion Congress voted for the one B-2 bomber - a plane the Pentagon and I didn't even want. I don't know yet where $1,642 for next year's garden insurance premium is coming from, let alone wages for the youths.

Then I saw in the news that logging was about to begin in the Headwaters forest. Demonstrations were going on, and I was sure Dana would be there. In the article, a logger was interviewed, sitting on his front porch holding a gun, who said, "If I lose my job, somebody is going to get hurt."

I knew just how he felt. I knew a whole group of youngsters who'd just lost their jobs, and all I could do was pray that no one - them or anyone else - would get hurt because of it.

I wished we could sit down together with that logger to plan a way of doing forestry and a way of growing food so careful that the logger on his porch and these city youths would have plenty of work and plenty of food.

Our small project's trouble is a lot like the dilemma of environmental groups that put all of their eggs in the legislative lobbying basket. I put most of my eggs in the basket of federal funding, counting on getting the help we needed. Now we all had to think about what to do, and it was painful.

In the following weeks, the struggle for Headwaters went on upstream from our struggle to keep our project going, and I thought about Dana many times. Like Shyaam, she doesn't give up. I realized, nothing irretrievable has happened. Headwaters forest was still whole, protected by a restraining order, and the marbled murrelet was going to have a court trial. STRONG ROOTS' young gardeners were still alive and growing, and so were our gardens.

We asked the youths what they thought. In his rather formal, Mississippi way of talking, Ernest said, "The jobs program was cool. Now that they're going to cut it out I believe it'll make a lot of youth feel bad. I believe the crime rate will go up, because youth will turn to selling drugs and stuff to get money."

I put most of my eggs in the basket of federal funding, counting on getting the help we needed. Now we all had to think about what to do, and it was painful.

Shyaam asked the kids if they would like to try staying with STRONG ROOTS without pay, seeing what we could make by selling produce. After all, we've always wanted STRONG ROOTS to be self-sustaining someday.

Ernest and Charles both said they would stay. Charles said, "If I could make maybe between two or three dollars an hour, I'd still do it, because it's fun. The best part anyway was harvesting the stuff, and we could try to sell it. But I'm going to miss the money."

What we are doing has to continue. No matter what any politician says, we know we can't keep on trucking in expensive food, burning gas and oil. Now that we've learned about soil depletion, we will forever look on concrete as something that saves land for future generations. Whether or not there are any social programs, food must be grown on vacant lots in cities, and young people must have work worth doing.

Grant writing again, I keep in mind Ernest and Charles, showing off a big plate of their tomatoes at a garden fair, enthusiastically offering STRONG ROOTS t-shirts for sale. If they're not ready to give up, how can I?

POSTSCRIPT: The Federal Youth Jobs program was re-funded with a 25% cut, and the STRONG ROOTS youth worked fewer weeks in Summer, 1997. The program was recently granted $20,000 by a City of Berkeley Community Development Block Grant, and $10,000 by a private foundation. STRONG ROOTS youth have built a memorial wall in one of their gardens to all those killed by violence in the neighborhood.

Note: A shorter version of this article appeared in Sierra Magazine in Spring 1997.

MELODY ERMACHILD CHAVIS is the author of *Altars in the Street* (BellTower/ Random House 1997). She is also a private investigator who volunteers with STRONG ROOTS in Berkeley, CA.

La Silent
What is to be Done?

By Rick Ayers

It all started on a Saturday night. Just after my wife and I got home from a friend's birthday, the phone rang. It was Experanza Herrera, a fellow teacher of Berkeley High School who is responsible for its Chicano Latino program.

She opened with, "Hi Rick, you haven't heard anything about Lisandra?"

"No . . .what?"

"I'm going to have to be the one to give you the bad news then . . .

I waited. "She was arrested on Friday with two other girls for beating up on another girl, an ESL student."

We made some plans to find out what we could about the incident, to try to get them out of custody, and to keep in touch. Esperanzo was going to a meeting at the church with Father Crespin and all the parents, those of the alleged attackers and of the victim. One of the arrested students was in my world literature class.

Lisandra Gonzalez, the Latino students have dubbed her La Silent. During the first week of school, I had barely noticed her. Small in stature, with a white moon-round face. She gazed at the world with large, unblinking Keene-painting eyes. At first I thought she was afraid; she had that deer-caught-in-the-headlights look. Later, I learned that that stare was just her way of taking things in; she had plenty to say when she was ready. It took a while before she smiled. Then she revealed a mouth full of braces, furthering the look of innocence.

I had known Lisandra's aunt, Alma, since before our daughter Sonia was born. We both worked at Centro Vida preschool in West Berkeley, I was the cook for five years and Alma eventually became the director. Lisan had grown up in the Mission District of San Francisco and had attended 9th grade of Roosevelt High School there. She had lived in a neighborhood where you don't join a gang, you are in it by virtue of where you live. She had gotten into trouble as a youngster and her family was moving her to Berkeley to get her away from that life.

Of course, Berkeley had the same cycles, the same claiming of colors and names, the Sureños with the blue and the number 13 and the Nõrtenos with the red and the number 14. Lisandra was on the fringe of the girl group called Berkeley Norteños (their graffiti said simply: "BN"), although Alma was

November 10, 1996

To: Juvenile Hall Referee
Via Alameda County Probation Department
2200 Fairmont Drive, San Leandro, CA

From: Rick Ayers, Director
Communication Arts and Sciences Program, Berkeley High

I am writing in regard to the case of Lisandra Gonzales, who was arrested at Berkeley High on November 7, 1997. I have no knowledge of the event that led to the charges against her. I write as the teacher who best knows her disposition in school and progress this year.

We started the Communication Arts and Sciences program at Berkeley High in order to find ways for school to be more successful for all students. Students have a chance to do video production and to work in closer collaboration with staff and peers.

Lisandra is one of the stars of the program, a young woman who has been turning her life around academically and socially in the course of the year. She has taken a leading role in getting fellow students to complete a major video project (filming a scene from Macbeth in Spanish). She has completed and rewritten all her assignments. She has been a leading staff member on a new publication at Berkeley High put out by and for Chicano Latino students (see enclosed articles, including one by Lisandra, and photo). And she has been selected to read her poetry on stage with renowned author Luis Rodriguez at New College of California on November 16.

I know the court is interested in steering students like Lisandra into programs that will engage them and get them on the right path. I believe she is already in such a program and has been making great progress. I ask the court to allow us to continue our work with her and to prove the successes she can achieve.

I would be glad to speak over the telephone or in person to anyone who is interested in investigating these matters further.

Thank you.

Sincerely,
Rick Ayers, ricklene@igc.org

keeping close tabs on her, dropping her at school, keeping her home on weekends, trying to break the cycle.

I am wondering all these things as I get up early on that Monday at 7:15. Here I was seeing great motion in Lisandra, great ideas and enthusiasm. She was participating in the Teaching Project, working with fourth graders at Washington School across the street. Sometimes she just wanted to stay in her world. She hated being put in groups with none of her friends, in fact that made her almost clam up entirely. Yet she was willing to lead ten kids on a video trip, to argue some major literary connections, to write poetry. When we found out Chicano writer Luis Rodriguez would be doing a poetry reading on the night before he was to speak at Berkeley High, and that some students would be asked to read with him, she immediately volunteered and began working on a piece for the special event.

All this bundle of contradictions, all these pedagogical dilemmas I was working on to make Lisandra succeed, all this was interrupted by this stupid action the girls took: the fight, the getting busted. And that was compounded by the stupid actions the administration took: calling the police instead of their parents; the police shipping them to Juvenile Hall after holding them at Berkeley Police Station for three hours. It was a small fight, some blows thrown, a kid with a puffy lip. Nasty stuff, not good, but qualifying for time in Juvie? I could not believe it.

Lisandra's Journal:

It was a pretty Saturday morning from what I saw from a shadow in my window. I waited every minute until it was visiting time. I didn't get to talk to my mother yet so I was scared and worried. The police had told me they didn't get a hold of my mother and that there were better things my mother had to do than see me. So I thought about that all day. I thought about a way to get out. I thought about if I opened the window and escaped and wondered where I would go. I thought about everything you can think of.

All I could thing of was what I would tell my family and my only trusted friend (Jorge). I looked really bad at that point. I prayed as much as I could. And for a moment I was giving up on praying. I felt that it wouldn't do no good and there was no use.

But I remembered that my Abuelita always told me to pray to God. I didn't want to let down my grandma so I had to promise myself to keep praying. I went to church at Juvie and listened to a lady preach to me. I felt so much better. During the time I waited, I would lay down on my bed and think, what could have happened? Why was I here? I questioned everything. I was so bored. I had nothing to do but cry. And wait for the worst food I ever tasted, I never really ate anything. I didn't have an appetite.

On Saturday nights, everyone went to a Rec Center where you play games. But I was so confused and lost that I decided not to go. I was mad at B-Eyes the most. But more mad at myself for letting this happen. I felt sorry for me and Anna the most. It was time to sleep and the music went on. There was a radio on the ceiling that you can't turn off. I felt like I was being tortured.

On the door there was a small glass window that you can see out. I wished so much that there would be someone to take me. Every time someone would pass by, you could see everyone running to the window to come and get them. And not one time was it for me. I closed my eyes and fell asleep on the cold cement floor.

After a whole day of trying to speak to Parole Officers, District Attorneys, or turnkeys who control visiting, I'm finally told that Lisandra is to be released.

It is so pedestrian, this routine of captivity and release. I check in at the desk, the woman in charge of busting the door locks open at two different ends of her cubicle directs me to take a seat in the waiting area, awaiting the arrival of Lisan's mother. Like everyone else in this sprawling institution, I soon get bored and stare dully at the painted cement-block walls.

Finally, after another hour passes, Lisandra Sr. and Alma arrive. The rain is coming down again. We hug and exchange news. They check in at the desk. Okay, the attendant will call for Lisandra to come up.

Suddenly there is Lisandra at the other side of the cubicle. She looks smaller than usual, paler. She has her lips pursed tight, looks intently at the form she is directed to sign. She looks up and spies her mother and the rest of us, a smile blooms on her face. Then she is back to work with the attendant, completing paper work, emptying a plastic bag with her personal belongings, getting her backpack.

Lisandra's Journal:

And then it was Sunday. I got up and was getting excited about me maybe leaving on Monday. It was visiting hours and I had gone to see my mother. She fell to the floor crying, she was so sad and mad. I hugged her and cried with her. I had four

Fifteen

by Lisandra Gonzalez

Everyone who is fifteen years old hates it.
You have to.
It's part of being fifteen.
But you have to think, if you're forty you
Would give a lot just to look fifteen
And to go back to your days when you were
Fifteen.
You might think older and look older
But you're only fifteen.
I'm too young
I think.
Too young to have some real fun.
I think.
Too young to have some real fun.
I think.
Just old enough to get on the best ride
At Great American.
Old enough to have a couple of babies on the side.
But not old enough to see a scary movie just yet.
I hate being fifteen.
How old am I again?

hours with her to talk and the time flew by. It was time to go back.

I never felt out of place when I would cry in front of the kids. I had gone back to my room, and it was time to shower. I had took a shower with another girl, she talked to me about her case and how she killed a girl. All I kept thinking was, oh shit, what if she tries to drown me? I left so quick and that was the first time I was anxious to get to my room.

I had one more day. That Sunday night was very long. I prayed that the hours would skip by and I closed my eyes and thought of all the good things in my life and things I'm going to change when I get out. And before I knew it, it was morning.

I got up and made my bed and laid on top. I started practicing Baile Folklorico. I felt stupid but I was bored out of my mind. I sat on the floor and that stopped me. I remembered how ignorant I thought my older brother was, when he talked about the Governor and the system and how he always wants to burn the USA flag and always "F--- Pete Wilson." I never looked at his way. I thought he was wrong.

But when I sat down, I thought to myself that the people who treat me like shit in here can do that. That's their job. I permanently changed my ways of thinking, ever since that day, how people who are innocent have no choice.

I heard the door open and it was a black woman and she said, "Get your ass up, you're going home." I was so happy. I went to a room to put my clothes on and went to the front where they come to get you. I saw Mr. Ayers, my Mommy, and my Tia.

I was very thankful for these three people. If it wasn't for them, I would have given up. I had left that day without seeing or hearing from the girls and Negro. I didn't care.

I did lose something. I lost my way of thinking in life. I now understand my brother and I have no respect for the people up there in the White House. And I have a permanent mark on me that I can never forget and never forgive the way of how Berkeley High and the system takes care of things.

The doors buzz and she is released out to use, swinging her backpack like a kid on a field trip. She hugs her mom, leaning into her and shaking slightly, as if cold. We all hug then head out the door, bunched together to talk and share in the comfort of community.

At home later in the day, I can't shake the images of the morning, the buzzing doors, the shoes outside of the surreal blue doors of lock-up, the boredom of the clock.

What can we really do to save Lisandra? Move her to another city? The great maw of the cities in the 90's will eat you up. What happened to our dreams, our sincere belief that we were going to change the world, that the dispossessed would actually achieve political power and overcome poverty, alienation, defeat?

Back at school on Wednesday, I write a sharply worded memo to the principal Edgar Flynt, Bob Tierny, the district guy who will deal with any expulsion hearing, and Vice Principal Carl Winters. I also attach one copy of the letter I gave to the PO at Juvie. I give a copy also to Betty Crowden, the Vice Principal.

I get no response from Mr. Flynt. In fact, I never receive evidence that he has read any of my memos. Lisandra is suspended until a meeting with Mr. Flynt next week in which she will learn if there is to be an expulsion hearing.

Betty stops in my room, however, to raise just one thing. "I understand you deciding to go to bat for this girl Lisandra, "she says. "But I question the wisdom of you using the stationery of Communication Arts for your letter to the Parole Officer. I mean, then it is not just a letter from you, it carries the weight of suggestion that it is from the whole program."

I find my self speechless at first. What's this about? It seems that she wants to avoid a straight ahead debate on all the issues and is choosing this technical issue, the stationery, as a place to pick away at it. But she's wrong. I respond. "Well, actually, no, I don't think this implies a vote of the students or parents or kids. If Mr. Flynt writes a letter on BHS stationery, does this mean he has the vote of the school behind anything he says? Of course not. I am the director of the CAS program and am trying to show the PO something about the program."

She backs off this point, starts bringing up the issue that is behind all the administration moves. "Maybe you don't know about the gang involvement here. It is not just about this fight. There are girls going around hurting other girls. There are girls who have even left the school in fear, not of Lisandra but of one of the other accused. This has to be nipped in the bud."

"Okay," I respond. "Look at it this way. When I teach a lesson, I have been trained in educational theory, I have some pedagogical reasoning behind it. Usually there is research behind any teaching approach, usually there is countervailing evidence on both sides of a decision of how to teach something. I teach the lesson. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. But it is all embedded in some theory, some rationale and professionalism about teaching.

"When this administration picks up students, though, when it sends them to Juvenile Hall for four days without charges, when it moves to expel someone for a brief fight in which minor injuries were reported, what is your penological theory? Did someone tell you that a trip to Juvie would do them good? What if I brought you evidence that a trip to Juvie would make them criminals? But we aren't even at that level of discussion. This administration has no training in criminology. It has no theory. The theory is at the level of a couple of guys talking in a bar. 'yeah, if we weren't coddling these criminals, we would not have so much youth crime.'

"You can't even argue with this. If you put forward an alternate point of view they just look at you like you are crazy."

Betty agrees with the complaint I am raising. She is not sure how to push the discussion ahead. I tell her I'm going to keep sending memos, I want to go to any hearing that is coming up on expulsion, and all her other teachers want to write letters, do what they can to keep working with her.

The next days are Kafkaesque. I keep talking to Carl. Mr. Flynt, then later Bob Tierny. They nod their heads

with the expulsion hearing. They say they have no choice. Of course, the real issue suggested underneath the whole thing is the suggestion that the BN, the Norteños, are involved.

Another irony, of course, is that after Alberto was killed Esperanza was struggling with the school to take on the gang problem. But the administration had no commitment to gang intervention, to creating alternatives. They only have a repression policy.

Again, the philosophy of the guys in the bar.

E-MAIL FROM LISANDRA'S AUNT:
Dear Rick

Thanks again for all your help. I really hope this does not get you into any trouble with co-workers or supervisors. Oh yes, Lisan asked if you could ask Mrs. Fields — the other teacher is the CAS program? There is one security guard Lisan describes as a very nice lady. The lady took it upon herself to take Lisan's homework to her teachers when she was arrested. Do you think we could get her name and ask her for a letter. Lisan seems to think that Mr. Wayne would not like this idea. Lisan describes her as someone really nice and who knows she isn't like the others. Who could it be?

De nuevo, muchas gracias Ricardo por toda tu ayuda!

Abrazos, Alma

November 18, 1997

To: Edgar Flynt, Carl Winters, Bob Tierny
From: Rick Ayers

This is a follow up memo to my one from last week. I know you are having a discussion with the mother of Lisandra Gonzalez today. I have spoken with Carl and Betty about the situation and have made clear my concerns and my evaluation of this student. I want to reiterate a few points.

1. Lisandra is a student who has made great advances this year . . . she has taken on numerous responsibilities in class projects (including leading a group of students to do an ambitious video project — taping a scene from Macbeth in Spanish). She has written her assignments as well as extra credit. She had taken leadership in Ms. Herrera's Academic Prep class, becoming co-editor of the newspaper they are working to put out.
2. Lisandra has been in trouble before and has not extricated herself fully from the influences that have led to this trouble. But she has been clearly moving in this direction, shown by her statements and actions, as well as by her serious approach to school.
3. I think the best approach to dealing with troubled teens is to get them engaged with genuine and authentic tasks in school, get them active in work that has meaning to them. In the absence of this, punishment is meaningless, and for some only becomes a badge of courage. These two philosophies — engaging school work and punishment — clash all the time, and they are tested precisely in a case like Lisandra's.
4. It is simply hypocrisy to try to sweep the "gang problem" under the rug by failing to address it directly, failing to have any programs or interventions on it, on the one hand, and to try to expel students for a minor fight because it is allegedly "gang related." Refusing to admit the presence of gangs as a PR measure (to not scare off the "hills parents") is like burying our heads in the sand. And trying to expel away the problem will only make it worse.
5. I've been told that the school must first concern itself with the victim. This is a subjectively compelling argument. Who can argue with it? But it does not constitute a coherent theory of criminology. The approach of punishing the defendant in the name of the victim is exactly what has driven our society to build the greatest number of prison cells per capita in the world (South Africa used to lead the US, but that has fallen since the apartheid regime fell). Subjectively it feels good to get the offender, to have sympathy for the victim. But with no programs that bring the offender back into a productive role in society, guess what? Crime gets worse.

For these reasons, I think Lisandra is exactly the type of student we should be working with. If Communication Arts and Sciences and Academic Prep is going to turn students around, then we have to have the chance to work with them. Give us a chance to show that this way works.

Finally I get a response, a letter from Mr. Tierny. He is defensive about the legal responsibilities of the district. He points out that "The police act independently of the school district and the Welfare and Institutions Code (Sec. 625) allows police officers the power to take a minor into custody even at school. In fact, past opinions of the California State Attorney Generals office, Ops 54-96, Ops 34-93, and Ops 32-46 state that school officials have no right to prohibit the police from interrogating children while in school." As far as the expulsion issue, he also quotes the Education Code (Section 48915a) to the question of expulsion. According to him, any fight with injuries must result in an expulsion hearing at which the final decision is made.

While he expresses concern about the need for social interventions in such cases, and frustration that we do this too little, Mr. Tierny is also convinced that the district must provide a consistent response, especially to gang violence.

He adds, "I'm saddened by the denial of our society to recognize the inequities, by the low esteem in which it holds our schools, by the hypocrisy of saying one thing and doing another. The priority of our budgets is wrong. All of this is true and it is through education and the re-prioritizing of our resources that the cycle will be broken. However, in the mean time we must also be realists in dealing with those elements of the school population that are, for whatever reason, intimidating the majority of students who are attending to business. All students have a right to a safe environment in which

to pursue their studies and socialization. I propose that we do this by applying the law and policies dealing with discipline in a just fashion, balancing the rights of the accused and the victim to the best of our ability."

Now this raises important issues. It is quite clear that we have to give teenagers limits. It would do them no good to simply declare them free and stand back and hope that everything goes well. Am I guilty of naive denial of the problem?

I don't think so. The problem is that limits and consequences can be built very strongly if there is a community that the student belongs to. With community, the expectations are strong. Community does not mean everyone is alike; indeed, the history of communities is the history of dealing with the ones who don't do well, who cause problems. But there is fundamental commitment to the needs of the group.

The security imposed on the modern high school, however, is the opposite of community. It is the height of alienation. It is a large institution which can barely tolerate your presence. It is teachers who have contempt for your culture and your yearnings. It is law and order efforts which are based on repression and control, not group standards. So let's talk about setting limits, but we cannot divorce this from the reality of the classroom culture, even from curriculum. The law and order educators say we shall create order first, then the students will have their butts in the chair and be quiet, then teaching can happen. The chaos of the modern schools is a tribute to their folly.

The hearing was held on December 3. Rita Martin, the Assistant Superintendent, headed the board and there were two other principals on it. She pointed out that they usually only take a half hour. This one took three and a half. Partly it was because we had a lawyer and all the issues were challenged. In addition, there were three teachers there to testify (me, Esperanza, and Kate O'Leary) and a mom and two aunts. Suffice it to say that the district people were nauseating. They were in no way pursuing an expulsion because they "had to," They were going well beyond obligation. They were doing everything they could to get her kicked out.

The district lawyer led off with an overview concerning the incident and concluded, "we need to expel this student to send a clear message that this kind of violence will not be tolerated," He questioned security chief Wayne and Carl Winters to develop his case. Their evidence was shoddy; the allegations of gang affiliation were wrong (Mr. Wayne; "can tell who is a gang by who hangs on a certain corner, and who hangs with them, plus they display the red.") They used the fact that the victim did not want to testify against Lisan (she was in communication through the church and wanting to resolve it in the community meetings) and other students at the park would not testify as evidence that Lisandra was guilty, since she must be intimidating them.

We came back again and again to the theme the lawyer had defined. Lisan's lawyer: "I would remind the board that we are not here to 'send a message.' We are here to decide the future of this young woman's life. We can't forget that."

I said that if there was any message to send, it was that a kid from difficult circumstances could make it. We can send a message to all the other young women like Lisandra that you can turn your live around, we can send this message when she graduates very successfully in two years. Esperanza, the aunts, everyone spoke.

Then we were dismissed so the board could decide. The next step would be a vote by the whole board if

Dear Alma, November 25, 1997

Thanks for your note. Yes, I did get homework from (the science teacher) Ms. O'Leary. She stopped by and was very interesting. She had given Lisan an F for the quarter. But she felt she was actually a good student, understood the material, was conscientious about her work, usually. The F came from the fact that she missed the work around a major project and it did not come in. But she really wants to keep her in the school. She said she'd write a letter (I showed her Ms. Helms' as an example). AND she would like to be a the hearing on Wednesday. I also saw the letters from Roosevelt — recommendations for Lisandra. What does this girl do that wins such enthusiastic support from so many adults? I think it is her honesty and thoughtfulness — vague words but ones that apply so strongly to Lisan.

— I spoke to a security guard who is a friend of mine. He said there were fights with injuries (minor) about every 2 or 2 1/2 weeks. Obviously there is not a suspension for fighting every time, though the administration says a fight with injuries demands expulsion, by law.

— Also, I spoke to Charles at the Health Center at BHS. I wanted to know how often a kid comes to the health center with an injury from a fight, even minor like a cut requiring a Band-Aid. On Wednesday, I got a note from him in my box: "11/25/97, Rick — Approximately once a week, according to our front desk person."

— Did you see Lisandra's poetry? She brought it in in the notebook she submitted. Again, I have to say it is stunning. There are spelling errors and some cliches, etc. but each one also has a core that is very deep, well thought out, and expressed in language that is powerful and rich. Again, the honesty is the core. I'll send you a copy over e-mail after I scan it into my computer.

Talk to you soon . . . Hey, everyone should be thanking YOU for all your work on this and for taking in your niece, acting as her guardian, advocating up at the school. I hope you get some major appreciation from your family and friends cuz this is quite a load you carry.

Best wishes,
Rick

they recommended expulsion. We had to wait for the following Wednesday.

On December 5, I attended a youth speak out in West Berkeley, at James Kenney Park. There Xochitl and Lisan arrived. Lisandra was bursting with something to say. She came over to me.

"Mr. Ayers. I got a call from Mr. Tierny. He says I can come back to school. Something about I have to wait until next Thursday. I'm not sure what it all means, but you can call my mom."

She beamed. We had won! it turned out to be an "expulsion suspended" which means any more trouble, even cutting class, can result in expulsion.

Then Alma, her aunt came in. She hadn't heard. Lisandra went up to her.

"Tia, guess what?"

"What?"

"I get to go back to school . . . yeah, they said we won!"

Alma stared at her, smiling, then pinched her nose. "Ooooh, you, Lisan." They had a long hug while Xochitl and I looked on.

We had a cake and party for E. when she returned on December 11, Thursday. She jumped right into the class, helping lead her group's Latin American book circle.

Administrators complained that Lisandra got off because she had a lawyer, mucked up the works. But who made this necessary?

Now, I would prefer for the school to be a different set up, a kind of community where there is trust and openness, where people come to the circle and tell the whole truth, where the circle then talks it out how to resolve the problem. But it is the administration, not the students, who have set you the adversarial system. They have hired the posse of security, built the fence, hauled in kids every day for suspensions and expulsions. This is their idea of the drive for order. We will create order, they say, a proper atmosphere for education, and then school can happen. They are two different things, order and education, and you achieve one then proceed with the other.

But we are working from a different philosophy of education. Education comes out of community and out of community comes a way we can work together. This may be ragingly idealistic but it is the only way we can teach the kids who need it most. If you want to round them up with armed police (as they have done) and march them into my class and stand over them glaring threats - don't ask me to "just teach." It won't happen.

And with the adversarial atmosphere the administration has created in the drive for order, they are reaping more and more resistance. Students called a forum on student rights. Students are demanding lawyers. I saw the student body president being suspended because he refused to give his driver's license to the head of security and demanded to see a lawyer. These administrators are blinded by the logic of their choices and they will suspend and expel and lay waste until, dammit, there is finally order. They don't remember LBJ or Bull Conner. You can hold all the weapons and still lose.

Rick Ayers is the father of four children and teaches English at Berkeley High School in California.

La Raza Unida

by Lisandra Gonzalez

La Raza Unida needs to unite
If we don't, we will always fight
We need to trust one another because things like this
Comes between sisters and brothers
If there is no live we will all shed a lot of blood
It comes to see how Red and Blue can
Come between me and you
The supportive familias that worried all night
Never expected to get that phone call late at night
Everyone cry's when you're under dirt
But when you were alive all they kept saying was that this won't hurt
After a few years, all they remember is the good times with you but
Tomorrow is just another day without you
Your name comes up when they remember a certain thing you liked or did.
But only thing their parents say is look what you did.
The only thing left to do is get them back
But the only thing you can do is never look back.
It's hard for you that first whole month, but to get over it you remember that
"it's all good, he was there on the corner that whole month."
Then hear a voice in your head
"Damn, that could have been me." Who's Next?
But it's all good, we're dying for what we call our set
Then you remember that gangsters don't cry, so smile now and cry later
But by the time later comes, that's the last thing you worried about
But for this familia, that's the only thing they can think about.
You make so many promises to yourself and familia when you're locked up
But when you're out, you're back to your old same self
Then someone comes around talking about
"La Raza Unida needs to unite. Homeboy!"
But all you keep thinking is that
Will never happen, can't ever happen, and I won't be alive to see it happen
But inside, you're too scared to even think about uniting.
So scared that you don't realize that you're the one that's hiding
I know one day La Raza will Unite so
That we can be one and all and all stand tall. And I promise that one day
Together we will unite and never fall.

Bad Boys

BY ALICE BRENT

During the past two decades of teaching in the primary grade I noticed from time to time that kindergarten teachers would single out certain black boys as problems. They would complain about these boys during morning meetings, lunch and after school. By the time the boy reached first grade he was doomed to failure and disapproval by the school society as a whole. When anything went wrong in the class he was the first to be blamed by other students and the teacher whether or not he did the misdeed. As the year progressed the boy increased his time spent in the office. His socialization skills quelled because he had fewer opportunities to develop.

This past year I returned to the regular classroom after working in a Special Education setting for five years. After the first staff meeting a teacher informed me that "unfortunately" I had Brad whom was "nothing but bad."

On the first day of school Brad and Alex entered the first/second grade classroom announcing proudly to different students that they were "bad." According to them, they had wreaked havoc in kindergarten and planned to continue in first grade. They met in the cafeteria earlier in the day and connected immediately. That morning Alex's mom told me that her son was aggressive, but if given limits would be a productive citizen. Over the summer Brad's mother wrote a poem about her son. She wrote that the poem "describes the way that I see him and hopefully with time and the both of us working with him that he will learn to better control himself and allow his aggressiveness to be used in a positive way." The poem read:

BRAD

I AM BRAD THE KNOW IT ALL FORCE,
AND THE DOMINANT FORCE;
I AM BRAD I DON'T FEEL WHOLE,
UNLESS I AM IN CONTROL;
I AM BRAD THE SUPERIOR YOU SEE, NO
ONE DARES TO QUESTION ME;
I AM BRAD A SIX-YEAR OLD WHO IS
VERY TOUGH AND FULL OF SOUL;

AND I THANK GOD FOR MY MOTHER
EVERY NIGHT, WHO KNOWS THERE IS
NO END TO MY INSIGHT;
SHE SETS THE PRIORITY OF WHAT'S
MEANINGFUL IN MY LIFE; AND
CONTROLS MY BEHAVIOR AND
UNDERSTANDS MY STRIFE;
I AM BRAD AND I ALWAYS FEEL SECURE
AND GREAT; AS LONG AS THERE IS
SOMEONE I CAN DOMINATE.

A third child, named Calvin, entered the class a little late accompanied by his father. His father informed me that he would stay for an hour to make certain his son got settled. He seemed nervous as he monitored everything his son did. He stated that the kindergarten teacher told him that if Calvin caused trouble in the first grade he would be transferred to a school for behavior disordered boys. Holding his son's hand, he walks over to the rug where some students are quietly playing board games. Calvin joins the children while his father looks on.

When pencils are passed out, Alex and Brad's pencil points 'accidently' get broken, so they must certainly have to walk over to the sharpener. During one trip and intimidating conversation takes place. Confusion ensues when Alex snatches a girl's pencil. Brad knocks a boy's paper on the floor and trips over a crayon box. Calvin's dad walks him to a table, hands him a pencil and suggests he begin the assignment of drawing and writing about his favorite things.

During exploration time, Alex and Brad 'accidently' destroy the block building of a fellow student. I want them to know that I plan to acknowledge only positive behaviors, so as they drive their Lego cars through another child's design, I quietly motion that "I really like how they constructed the cars." I then ask them to please help another student rebuild their structure. When Brad threatens to scribble on a classmate's paper, I remark that I am really proud that he is helping the intended victim. During these interactions Alex and Brad look so bewildered as if expecting some sort of punishment. They eventually leave the students alone and complete most of their work.

During the first hour Calvin's dad carefully monitored his son's play with a few children. After he leaves, Calvin's Lego truck 'accidentally' crashes into Alex's design and an altercation ensues. As I pull the two apart, I announce to the class that we should all sit down and establish some rules. The students quickly put away their assignments and we talk about respecting the rights of others. The children make two rules; (1) to put the toys away when asked within five minutes and (2) not hit anyone during school time. After the rules are recorded, several children share their

writing including Brad and Calvin.

As we prepare to go to lunch, Calvin begins pushing the line. I tell them that later we will decide how to give everyone a chance to be captain. While sitting in the lunchroom, Brad's juice 'accidentally' spills over into a girl's lunch. All three of the "bad boys" shout to older siblings and friends across the lunchroom, and each runs to toss something into the garbage at least four times. While this is going on, I walk around to speak to all of the students in the class individually. Eventually I speak to each of the three "bad boys."

While sitting on a bench in the lunchroom, I make some general comments about the first day in school. I ask them for suggestions regarding what we should do in the lunchroom to make things go smoothly. I don't mention the shouting, spilling juice or 'shooting' baskets with milk cartons or the fact that all of the cooks, janitors, teachers scolded them several times.

I speak to each boy separately so he won't feel the need to act 'cool' or indifferent. I tell each boy that I really like how they made the cars from the Legos and ask them how they make them go so fast. Brad proudly tells me that one black piece goes forward really fast if you roll it backwards first. I ask him if we should go outside for recess. Brad and I walk over to where Alex and Calvin are seated. I ask them if we should go out. I tell them that if no one is pushed or hit 'accidently', we will stay out for twenty minutes instead of the allocated ten minutes. In other words, the responsibility for maintaining control outside is up to each one of them. I also tell them that in order to play tomorrow, they must finish the rest of their assignments when we return to the classroom.

The boys behave well during recess. Alex and Brad complete three tasks that afternoon. Calvin completes four math tasks. A few incidents occur but don't warrant more than a disapproving look. I try hard to catch them doing something that I can comment on positively.

While the children are preparing to go home, I inform them that I plan to call half of their parents that evening to tell them what great first and second graders they are. I tell them I will call the other parents on the following evening.

That evening I call Alex's home first. His mother begins to apologize for her son before I get through with my introductory remarks. She states "I know he is a handful and will speak to him immediately." When I tell her that I am calling to tell her what a great job he did in school, she asks "Really?" and calls her husband to the phone.

NOT ONE POSITIVE COMMENT WAS MADE FOR EITHER BOY FOR THE ENTIRE SCHOOL YEAR.

I then call Brad's home. His father answers. Thinking that I am calling to ask for volunteers, he tells me that he "works nights while his wife works days". He tells me that he can't volunteer because he is "stuck all day with the babies at home, one in diapers, one in preschool." I informed him that I understand. I then tell him that Brad was the first to find the date on the calendar. He then responds with, "If you need anything done that I can do at home I'll be happy to do it". He informs me that his wife can make copies for the class at her job and write poems and children's stories for the students.

I finally speak to Calvin's mom. Although she is separated from her husband, they contribute jointly in the responsibility of his schooling. She asks me if Calvin 'cut up' after his father left. I tell her that other than wanting to be first in line, he behaved well. She tells me that she works at a nearby hospital and plans to volunteer twice a week during her lunchtime. She also tells me that the kindergarten teacher at the other school recommended that the family get counseling because Calvin's behavior was so bad. Calvin's mom states that she wants "school to be different this school year." She informs me that the kindergarten teacher called her everyday at work to tell her about some minute thing Calvin did. I tell her that Calvin will to do well this year.

Weeks go by. Alex, Brad and Calvin often gets into mischief, but they settle down when asked and demonstrate that they are quite capable students who make wise choices when given the opportunity.

One day Brad goes the entire morning without pushing, grabbing or snatching someone else's property. He marches up to me while the others are lining up for lunch and announced "I'm going to be good today." I chuckle initially, then realized that he is quite serious. During the afternoon he sits at a table with some girls and worked quite diligently. While getting ready to go home, he smiles boldly and states quite emphatically, "I *told* you that I was going to be good today." I smile and inform him that he did a very good job all day. He replies that he can't wait to tell his mother.

One morning Alex and another student are reading a passage that Alex had not seen before. He notices that I am watching. He smiles and proudly remarks to his peer, "I'm smart in this school!"

I don't wish to paint an idyllic picture. Not a morning goes by without at least two of the three getting into disputes, pushing, snatching, grabbing

and tumbling down the work of others. But they are not punching, hitting or fighting while trying to resolve these conflicts. I am exhausted by lunchtime and even more exhausted when I leave at four o'clock, but I am proud of how the children are slowly growing into a community of learners.

Six weeks of school pass by before I receive cumulative folders for Alex and Calvin. The folders are so fat with paper they have to be crammed into my mailbox. I assume they are thick because the teachers have saved many samples of their schoolwork and projects. To my amazement, the majority of the contents are notes, forms, and anecdotes of misconduct. Reluctantly I open each and decide to read what the previous teachers felt so necessary to document. Both folders have at least two dozen hand written notes stating that the child "jumped up and down in line, crawled on the floor during nap time, sang a different song from the other children in music, whistled without permission, did not sit quietly during story time" and so on. Not one positive comment is made for either boy for the entire school year. Both are recommended for special education by the kindergarten teachers.

All three boys have anecdotal records completed by preschool and kindergarten teachers stating that they are difficult children. Although the column on the report sheet provides space for both positive and negative behaviors to be recorded, only negative incidents are written.

A column listing disciplinary actions taken by teachers, such as 'eliminated from recess, time out and removal from class' is prominent. Were the pre-school and kindergarten teachers overwhelming in dealing out 'punishments'? Did the punishments curtail misconduct or fester it out? The paper trails seem endless. The reports are initiated in September and continued through June. What was the purpose? After reading these comments I decide that my boys are not a problem, their school environment created problems for them.

Calvin's kindergarten teacher recommends counseling for the family. Alex' report is much similar to Brad's. In addition Alex's former teacher writes, "Alex exhibits characteristics of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder — constant motion, hollering out, inappropriate physical responses, over reactions, aggressiveness, name calling, oppositionaltiy, uncooperative behaviors, kick boxing, crawling and running around the room, pushing, short attention span. 11/15/96"

I DECIDED THAT MY BOYS WERE NOT A PROBLEM, THEIR SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT CREATED PROBLEMS FOR THEM.

I am appalled at how loosely the previous teachers labeled these boys hyperactive, behavior disordered and learning disabled. I am pleased to read further that the school psychologists' reports states that the boys are "within normal range and did not qualify for services at this time." I wonder how many children are labeled primarily because the classroom environment does not meet their individual needs.

One comment on Calvin's report especially makes me wonder if the learning environment was a positive one for him. The teacher states on his report card that he did not ever complete his work. Calvin does take a long time to get settled in the morning, in fact he completes most of his morning tasks in the afternoon, in addition to all of his afternoon tasks. He prefers to stand at his table or lie on the floor when writing, but he works very diligently.

On the morning before I receive these reports, I had administered a test on the Solar System because we are bringing our studies on this theme to a close. The children could select one or more of four different tests that ranged from drawing and naming planets, writing an essay or reading and answering ten factual questions about the planets.

Calvin selects one test but he only colors Jupiter. He writes a nice essay and tells me that he is finished. I ask him if he can color the other planets and label them. He takes a blue crayon and colors them all within ten seconds, and hands the paper with another paper to me. I should have interpreted 'tired' for 'finished.' On the other sheet, which I did not see initially, he neatly colored each planet, labels them, and writes the following:

> The solar system has 9 planet
> they are Mercury Venus Earth
> Mars The Asteroid Belt
> Jupiter Saturn
> Uranus Neptun Pluto
> and the Sun is a Star

On the other essay sheet he writes:

> Ther are More 10000
> Asteroids Belt
> Ther are Big Ones and little
> ones and ther may Be More
> then 500000000
> Well we will Never know.

A boy who was 'written up' and recommended for special education because he never finished his work composes all of this.

All three boys are African American. All three are written off as "bad" before their sixth birthday. What if Calvin was

sent to a self-contained special education class? When will he have the opportunity to develop and improve his social skills, especially pushing in a line of twenty-five children? Will he be given the option of selecting which test he wants to demonstrate concepts learned or will the test be from a canned ditto sheet? What if his answers don't fit? What if he selects the wrong multiple choice response? Will he be given the opportunity to explain why he made that choice? Will he be re-evaluated the next year with hopes of re-entering the mainstream class? Will he feel out of place because he doesn't share the same experiences as the other second graders? Will he be placed back into special education because he acts out because he was frustrated?

The percentage of young men who drop out of high school that are enrolled in special education classes is greater than those who are not. Are Calvin, Brad and Alex doomed to be labeled as special education cases because they are black and learn against the grain?

I have always been interested in working with challenging boys, however, after reading William Ayers' poignant book *A Kind and Just Parent* and participating in two seminar classes that he conducted, I have been made more aware of how unkind and unjust educational institutions are. I have now resolved to make certain that any challenging students that I come in contact with, especially boys, are not to be labeled "attention disordered," "hyperactive" or "bad," because the institutions within and outside of schools are designed to make them fail. This destruction has already had catastrophic outcomes in the black community.

Although conflicts in the room have declined, they still occur in the lunchroom and in the presence of others. It seems the boys regress to their previous behaviors when outside the classroom. It is my hope to dispel this notion that these three children are 'just bad' during the two years that they are in my class. I hope others will open their minds and see them as bright and promising leaders.

Alice Ocrey Brent has taought junior high, bilingual, primary, special education, resource reading, and mathematics for 29 years. She is concurrently a doctoral student at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a primary K-2 teacher.

Lies

Telling lies to the young is wrong.
Proving to them that lies are true is wrong.
Telling them that God's in his heaven
and all's well with the world is wrong.
The young know what you mean. The young are people.
Tell them the difficulties can't be counted,
and let them see not only what will be
but see with clarity these present times.
Say obstacles exist they must encounter
Sorrow happens, hardship happens.
The hell with it. Who never knew
the price of happiness will not be happy.
Forgive no error you recognize,
it will repeat itself, increase,
and afterwards our pupils
will not forgive in us what we forgave.

Yevgeny Yevtushenko

Too Many of Our Young Are Dying

moments represent a lifetime.
our hearts lose sunshine
when children cease to smile
words
and share with parents their
passionate
pain.
our children, in the millions
are dropping from the tree of life
too
soon,
their innocent hearts and bodies
are forced to navigate within
modern
madness,
searching for life and love
in the basements of crippled
metropolis,
a disintegrating culture too soon.

are we not all earth & lakes &
sun?
are we not all mamas & papas
to their young music?
their lives are not abstracting
bragging
rights,
we must never stop listening
to their stories & songs.

when our children
do not share their young
pain
it is a sign of our closed ears
and punctured hearts
do not misread the silence
in their
eyes,
they are seeking sunshine
from us
immediately.

Haki R. Madhubuti

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Dangerous Minds

Experiences in Chicago's West Side High Schools

BY JENNIFER SMITH

When I tell people that I teach in one of Chicago's west side high schools inevitably someone brings up the movie *Dangerous Minds*. "You poor thing," they add. "How can you stand it?"

No one ever says, "What a great chance to do something for kids." Not ever. In seven years, I have never once heard a positive comment from anyone when I tell them what I do. And when I left my little farm school in Michigan to come to the inner city, people literally wanted to get my head examined. "Why don't you apply to the suburbs? At least they have money. They're safer."

How wonderful that I have that choice. Yes, I can move over to a "nice" suburban Chicago high school, or even change careers entirely and work in a skyscraper overlooking Lake Michigan. But my students? What choices do they have? Even those kids in our surrounding neighborhoods who are lucky enough to place into magnet schools like Lane Tech or Whitney Young, still have to head home where people are blown up in car trunks and drug hawkers call to elementary kids.

One of the pillars of our government is public education, the "great equalizer," which gives every citizen an opportunity to reach the American Dream. But, let's face it, schools are not at all the same. The first year I taught in the inner-city, we didn't have textbooks for Freshman English. (And we wondered why our reading scores were plummeting through the floors.) I have two computer tables in the back of my room for which I've been told there are computers coming. That was two years ago. The printers for the computers we do have in the lab have not worked in six months. Without enough money for a service contract, the printers sit idle under plastic covers. With the exception of National Honor Society and Peer Mediation, there are no clubs to join, no drama productions to enjoy; even the sports program is minimal. Kids have been clamoring for a track program since I've been there, but to no avail.

The average day for our students begins at the metal detector. When they've successfully passed through, the security guards have them hold out their arms like scarecrows in a field, patting them down for various felonious objects: weapons, beepers, cellular phones, and drugs. "White shirts! ID cards on!" they bark. (Our students wear uniform white shirts to eliminate the possibilities of gang associated clothing.) Going down the hallway, staff members yell at the kids to take off their coats. (Weapons are easily hidden in those oversized down coats essential to surviving a Chicago winter.) Ironically, there is nowhere for many of the students to put these coats as there are not enough locks for all the lockers. Ironically, the order for new locks cannot be put through because there is not enough money in the budget.

My memories of high school in suburban Michigan are of building homecoming floats, painting signs for the pep rallies every autumn Friday afternoon, cooking taco meat for Spanish Club, dreaming of my future prom date, and dashing to the bathroom between every class to reapply the purple eyeshadow and pink lip gloss that were all the rage in the mid 80s. The worst thing that I could imagine was for that cute senior in my art class to see me getting off the bright yellow school bus and realize that I didn't have my own car.

I try to imagine my students going through one of my "typical days" from back then. Of course, that only lasts a minute because this high school doesn't even have it's own football field, doesn't really celebrate homecoming, and doesn't have pep rallies because there are hardly any bleachers in that tiny gym. The girls' bathroom on the second floor has mirrors you can barely see yourself in. It has a soap dispenser that has been torn down, and one of the sinks is falling off the wall. We don't have dances anymore because last year a student got shot outside in a drive-by after leaving the Christmas dance. He crawled back into the school and bled to death in the foyer.

But even with all of this: the discouraging climate, the violence, the drug dealing, the gang banging; my students find a way to shine. It's as if they can take the severest beating and still come out smiling. There is a strong will in them to succeed. My ninth graders are not the students America saw in *Dangerous Minds*. They are enthusiastic, willing, and eager for praise. In my eighth period English class, kids fight over who will get to read a part in *Romeo and Juliet*. (We have books now!) We have to draw numbers, and even then, people are disappointed if their parts aren't "long." Kids pick their best papers to be hung in the hallway outside my room, and I hear it, but good, if I haven't displayed theirs in what they feel to be the "best" spot.

It's overwhelming, the power teachers have over their students, yet it's easy to forget when buried under paperwork, constantly changing student and teacher expectations, and ever mounting responsibilities.

I have a pile of good note postcards to send home when students have done something positive. They're pre-stamped and ready to go. Today in class someone noticed them and remarked how they had gotten one in the beginning of the year (always wanting everyone else to know how awesome they are, my shy darlings). I guiltily realized that I hadn't sent them out in awhile, and felt ashamed at skipping over something so easily done.

After class, my little "cipher in the snow" who melts into the wall and never says a word came up, unfolded a grimy, beat-up piece of paper and pushed it silently at me. It was the postcard I had sent him when he had gotten a B on his first quarter exam. He had been carrying it around in his pocket for months. "I was really proud of you for this," I said. He just smiled and shoved the note back in his pocket. I swallowed my heart as he shuffled out the door.

I don't have the answers as to how to "save" these "at-risk" children. I wish I could magically transform into Lou-Anne Johnson, teach some poetry, and have all my kids get excited about their learning. If only there really were movie endings to life. I wish I, like the current administration, could believe that if we just had connections to the Internet, all of my kids would become honor students. Unfortunately, there is no perfect solution. I don't have the perfect lesson plan, nor am I the perfect teacher. I haven't figured out how to get my students to come to school every day or how to get then to turn in homework on a consistent basis. I haven't figured out how to get their parents to come to their kids' games or to take an active interest in their education. What I do know is that these kids are some of the strongest people I have ever known, full of hopes and dreams for a brighter future, no matter how bleak their current situation. Don't throw in the towel quite yet on the next generation. They just may surprise you.

Jennifer Smith teachers English/ World Studies at Manley Career Academy in Chicago, Illinois. She has been teaching for six years.

What do today's kids live their life as?

by Marquita Austin

Today's kids live their life unfairly and wrong. I don't think it's our fault. My life has been a living hell for the last four years. My mom was on drugs and my biological father has never been in my brothers' and my lives. I have one sister that is five years old, a little brother that's two, a big brother that's 16, another brother that's nine, and my other brother who is 15. I am 14.

My life started getting bad in 1993 when every thing was getting out of hand. My mom had been my mother *and* my father. Then my mom got a boyfriend (my little sister and brother's daddy). He helped my mom out a lot. Then he was getting abusive to my mother. He busted her head and hit her a lot. So she left him and did for my brothers, sister, and me by herself.

A couple of years passed, and my mom found a new boyfriend. I liked him a lot and considered him my daddy. He loved my mom and my brothers and sister a lot. My mom went back to doing what she was doing, though, and it put us through a lot. My daddy was going to leave, but I wouldn't let him. I cried and held on to him, and he stayed. My mom lost our home, and we had to stay at my daddy's store where he fixed and sold washing machines and dryers. It was hard living there because there were no bathtubs, no kitchen, and no rooms. Just a big space. And at night, my daddy would let our beds down, and we went to sleep. At school we had to be careful not to get in trouble, because if we did and they took us home, the school would have called DCFS, and we would have been sent to a foster home. It got harder living there, so we started going to motels for a couple of days.

Then my mom and my dad got us a new place. It was in the projects, but we had our own rooms and a bathtub. My mom went back to doing drugs and was owing money to the drug dealers. They shot up our home and broke in. They tore our house up, busted the TV and windows too. They took all my mom's food stamps. The next day was Christmas. We didn't even have a dinner. My dad was very mad and hurt. He tried to do all he could to help my mom. My mom called the police, and they said they were going to put us in a foster home, but they didn't. The governor put us in a hotel until my mom found us another place. We didn't have to pay for anything. We had two rooms; my mom and dad had one, and my brother, sister, and I shared the other. It was fine because the rooms were big. We had a swimming pool, free room service, and a bathroom that was really big. We stayed there for about six months, then my mom found us another house.

My mom slowed down on the smoking, but was not completely done. We had no freedom or anything; we just stayed in the house and watched TV. One day my mom left us in the house by ourselves while my dad was a work. Somebody called the police and said we were going to a foster home.

My dad said he wasn't going to let us go. He called my grandma and told her what was going on. She said we could live there. I ran and went to go find my mom. I found her, and when we went back to see if my brothers and sister were gone, they were. I didn't want to leave my mom and daddy, so I stayed. My mom was sad and mad that they were gone, but I really think deep down inside that she thought it was the right thing to do.

A month passed by, and my mom said that I had to go too. I ran and said no. I didn't want to leave. Then they caught me, put me in the car, and drove away. When we got to my grandma's house, I tried to stay in the car, but I couldn't. My mom was crying. I was pulling and calling for my daddy, but they just sat there crying. They got me in the house, and I sat down. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't believe she left me. I thought she would never let me go. I had stuck by my mom's side the whole time. No matter what she did, I always loved my mom.

My grandma let my little brother and sister live with their daddy, and my brothers and I stayed with her. At the beginning, it was just fine, and then things started getting abusive. My brothers and I found out my grandma just wanted us for the money the state was giving her for us. Sometimes when the check came, we didn't get anything. When we made mistakes, she was quick to slap us or hit us. One day my brother got in trouble at school and she beat him with a 2x4 piece wood. She had broken his arm. She hit us with whatever she could get her hands on. She whipped me with a fishing pole, and iron cord, and her hand. She didn't care where she hit us. One day I got in trouble at school. When I got home, she whipped me with the iron cord. I was down on the floor, and she grabbed me by the hair and pulled me down to my room. I knew things were going to be bad there, and they were. We stayed with my grandmother for three years.

When I went back to school after that incident, the teachers saw the bruise on me. I swore to them that nothing happened. I told them that my brother and I had been playing and I scratched my leg on a nail in the wall. Then, my grandmother got custody of my little cousin. She let him go see his mother, and his mother whipped his hand. When he went to school, his teacher saw it, and she called DCFS. They came to our house to get him. Two days later, my two brothers and I had to go to court. They said we couldn't live there any more because of what happened.

My brothers and I moved in with our cousin. Things got really out of hand there. My brother didn't get along with my cousin's wife and that started things. One day my brother got in trouble at school, and he knew he was going to get in trouble at home, so he never came back. At my cousin's house, my brothers and I had to do everything. We had to clean up every day. They never had to do a thing. They had three kids, and every time their room got messed up, we had to clean it. My other brother got tired of living there and left. So then it was just me. I had to do everything myself.

My graduation from eighth grade came, and my mom called me. I was very happy and surprised because I hadn't heard from her in years. She came to my graduation. I didn't even care that I was graduating. My only thought was: MY MOM IS HERE! I was so happy. If I could have had my brothers there too, it would have been perfect. They had been in my life for so long, and when they left me too, it hurt so bad.

A month after graduation, I was still getting treated unfairly. It was like "Cinderella." I had all the chores to do. They didn't even help out. I didn't have freedom to go outside. Then, when it got too hot, they let me out. I couldn't go far, and I had to be in before the street lights came on. Then one day I got in trouble because my cousin was going out of town and he told me I could stay with my father until he got back. My real dad let me go to another cousin's house for a Fourth of July party. The cousin I was staying with did not want me to go down there. So when he came back from out of town and found out where I had been, he slapped me and told me I was not going anywhere until school started again . I went to my room and prayed to God to make it better. But it only got worse. I said to myself, I'm not staying here any more. My cousin said go ahead and leave; he didn't care.

The next morning I took a big bag of clothes, put my jacket over my arm, and went downstairs. My cousin's wife was in the bathroom. I said to her, "I'm about to go."

She said, "Where are you going?"

I said, "I don't know."

Then she asked me, "Do you have any carfare?"

I replied, "A token."

She gave me a dollar. I took the bus to my friend's house. I put my clothes there and spent that night at her house. The next morning we rode the bus to my cousin's house where I had spent the Fourth of July. I told her what was going on and she said I could stay with her. I liked that very much. She let me do whatever I wanted. I realized that was probably the wrong thing to do.

Someone called my biological father and told him what I was up to. He came and got me. I asked myself, what does he care? And why is he trying to get back in my life? He had never been there before, so why try now? He said I was getting too wild and took me to his house. He had three step-kids that he took care of (not his real children). He also had a girlfriend. When we got there, his girlfriend didn't act all that nice. She acted like she didn't want me there. My father didn't let me do anything or go anywhere. I went in the front of his house and beat up four girls. They put warrants on me, while my father was at work. When he came back, I told him what happened. The next day, he went to work and his girlfriend called the police on me because she didn't want me there. She told the police that my father told her to call because he didn't want me. The police took me to the station and asked me if I knew anyone who would take me.

I gave them my auntie's phone number. They called and got no answer. They said they were going to put me in a foster home/center until they could find someone to take me in I asked if they could try my auntie again. Thank God she picked up the phone that time. Now I live with her. She has a husband, three kids and two step-kids. My aunt and uncle are very special parents and are very loving. We have everything we could ask for except freedom.

I am at the age where I am starting to like boys. One day I tried to sneak a boy in the house, and somebody told on me. We didn't do anything, but I still got in trouble. My aunt and uncle lost their trust in me. That's the most important thing to have, and I lost it. Now I have no TV or radio. My life just doesn't get better, it gets worse. My brothers and sisters are fine. My big brother is trying to maintain, and my next oldest brother is in jail. He's only 15. I haven't heard from my mother. I don't even think about my biological father. I have a new family to care for me now, and I love them very much.

When kids have problems and act the way they do, it's because of the way they were raised. When kids live and have been through a tough life, it makes them do bad things, but it also makes them a better person. They don't want the next generation to be like they were. When I get to be grown, I will never live a life like I have lived. My kids will always have a mom **and** a dad. They will be the most important thing in my life. They will never have to want for anything. They will never be abandoned or have to sneak to do things. My kids will be kept clean, have name-brand shoes, and clothes. They will always have a roof over their heads. And they will never have to worry about mommy leaving them.

MARQUITA AUSTIN is a sophomore at Manley Career Academy in Chicago in the Graphics Communications School.

Life today for children is hard. Nowadays you get pressured into things such as selling drugs, being in a gang, dropping out of school, fighting, having sex, stealing, robbing a store, or killing/hurting someone because you are scared of the consequences if you don't do them. Some kids get talked about really badly or picked on constantly. Some kids have an abusive family or come from one. Some kids use drugs, drink, or smoke because they think it's cool, but it's not.

The environment a lot of us come from makes life difficult. The people who are around to hang out with are not always good people. All of the killing and violence and racism and unprotected sex and gangs are tearing us up. I think it's time to stop because it's all getting played out, like the Michael Jordan gym shoes. It's time to come out with something new, something positive, something about getting along with one another, something about love, something about making great neighborhoods for kids to grow up in. Kids like me.

KHARMELITA BRIDGEFORTH *is a student at Manley Career Academy in Chicago in the Foods and Hospitality School.*

At school
All the day,
It's what I make it
My or your way...

I choose because
I want to stay,
In lesson with life,
And not go astray.

I believe I'll make it
Believing is a must
Reaching and grabbing,
Reading and rush.

This life is mine
The deal is made
In my knife
Knowledge the blade.

And I cut you
To make you believe
And if you can't
To you I'll read!

The lesson of life
I've learned I'll teach
And give you a lift
When you decide to reach.

At school
All the day,
It's what you make it
My or your way!

JANETTA LOREMAR LEFLORE *is a student at Manley Career Academy in Chicago*

The meaning of childhood to me is to raise young kids such as myself to be more responsible and not try to be an adult so fast.

Life for young people is like a whole misunderstanding unless you have a cool mother. I say this because I stay with my grandmother. She always asks me why I wear Jordan gym shoes that cost so much and never lets me off the hook. My grandmother never eases up on me because she cares and wants me to be something special that pays well.

Students' hopes today are, no holding back, to be like the people they know. Some want to be stars, actors, or sports players. Unfortunately, most of the kids I know who could have had good jobs and lives are now drug dealers, trying to be like a big bother or anyone else they looked up to who led them in the wrong direction. In the west side neighborhoods, some kids already think there's no other way than to go the bad way. Others just try to hold on.

QUANTELL WOODS *is a student at Manley Career Academy in Chicago in the Construction Technology School.*

'AND YA DON'T STOP'

Using Hip Hop in the Language Arts Classroom

By Wayne Wah Kwai Au

Livin' in these last days and times,
check yourself,
and what you feed your mind. I know
you can't be blind livin' in the future . . .

Boogiemonsters,
"The Beginning of the End"

A few years ago I attended a workshop where a colleague was presenting a teaching method he uses to get his high school students more connected to their math work: using popular, mainstream rappers as the subjects of word problems. In particular, I remember a word problem where the object was to see if Snoop Doggy Dogg, a real-life platinum-selling rapper who supposedly was in one time zone, could have committed a murder in another time zone without having to travel through time. I'm sure my colleague's intentions were to find a way to reach the students, but I couldn't help being critical of his approach. Not only was this a stereotype linking of young African-American men to violence, but the patronizing tone and tokenistic sentiment of this idea lacked a respectful understanding of urban youth and their music.

Breakdown

Technically speaking the term "Hip Hop" describes a culture as a whole, that includes D.J.ing/M.C.ing, B-boying/B-girling, and Graff. Mainstream America knows these terms as rap music, breakdancing, and mural/graffiti art (not to be confused with tagging or gang graffiti), all of which make up the music, dance, and visual art, respectively, of hip hop culture. In its roots in the late 1970s and 1980s, hip hop culture developed as a positive alternative to the violent gangs that were developing in New York at the time. B-boys and B-girls, and D.J.s and M.C.s would form crews and battle each other on the dance floors and in the parks instead of fighting out their differences in the streets.[1]

The beauty of hip hop as a culture lies in its ability to absorb anything in its path, take what it can use, and make it into something new. Take for instance the art of D.J.ing. At the core of hip hop is the idea that the D.J., using a snippet of music called a break beat, can use two copies of one song and put them on two different turntables. Then he or she can play that break beat over and over by switching between the turntables.[2] The D.J., having constructed a "new" song by extending and mixing up the original break beat, creates a musical space for the M.C.s to move the crowd with their words and the B-boys and B-girls to move their bodies to the music.[3]

Rap music has a rich and varied history and has always been a vital form of communication. Chuck D, former front man for the now-defucunt group Public Enemy, stated several years ago that rap is like the "Black version of CNN" because it is a medium of communication that is created by, and reaches to inner-city, African American youth. The core sentiment of his statement still holds true today, but because of the rapidly changing demographics of the inner cities and because rap music's popularity has grown to reach past the suburbs into national and international fame, you could now safely say that rap music is the CNN of urban youth at least, if not many youth worldwide.[4]

One of the many widely distributed songs in this genre to address social issues was Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five's "The Message." It presented the realities of poverty and street life, unromanticized and unrelenting, and was also unfortunately laced with intermittent homophobia and misogyny.

This mix of political flavors, while certainly not representative of all that rap music has to offer, has been a point of constant cultural struggle within hip hop culture as it has tried to work out the growing pains associated with its recently found, marketable, mainstream appeal. For instance I have always been critical of rap music's treatment of women. From my vantage point as a D.J., I have studied and watched the portrayal of women go through leaps and bounds as well as bumps and recessions over the last decade. When I was in high school, I remember Queen Latifah stepping out in her Afrocentric clothing and commanding respect, as she stood with her head held high and rapped her hip hop anthem, "Ladies First." It was a powerful image.

Queen Latifah is still around, but the current top 40 hits are full of female rappers, like Foxy Brown and Lil Kim in heavy make-up, high heels, fish-net stockings, and tight dresses, who rap about how they will be good to you as long as you buy them diamond rings,

fancy cars, clothes, etc. This type of artistic "dialogue" mirrors a continuous political ebb and flow within hip hop culture, if not within society itself. While bragging about being a street hustler may make a platinum-selling record, you can still find lyrics about police brutality and poverty on almost any full length album today.

Speaking Poetry

My intent here is not to endorse just bringing any old rap tape in and playing it for your class. What I am suggesting is that teachers use rap music with a clear understanding of how to meet their educational objectives through the music. There are an infinite number of ways to do this, and as a teacher I personally have just barely begun to scratch the surface. One of the most effective methods I have found is to examine lyrical content for poetic device, imagery, and style. More creative rap artists make use of complex metaphors and word plays in their rhymes. One of my favorites, for both its perspective and accessibility to those new to the music, is the group Spearhead. Spearhead's debut album, *Home*, addresses a wide range of issues, from homelessness to AIDS, to contemporary gender relations, all the while making use of poetic metaphor. An especially well-done piece entitled, "Hole In The Bucket," uses the familiar children's song as a basis to talk about homelessness, poverty, and our society at large. Here the lead vocalist, Michael Franti, launches into the psychology of how he feels a someone asks him for spare change:

He's starin' in my eyes just as I'm walkin' past
I'm tryin' to avoid him cause I know he's
gonna ask
me about the coinage, that is in my pocket,
but I don't know if I should put it in his bucket.
Walk right past him to think about it more;
back to the crib, I'm opening up the door.
A pocketfull of change, it don't mean a lot to
me.
My cup is half full, but his is empty . . .

Tragically by the time he decides to go back and give his change to the man on the street, he finds that all his money has fallen through a hole in his pocket. This song is both politically astute and metaphorically sound because it draws on the glaring connection between the "hole in the bucket" and a society that creates poverty on one hand, yet refuses to deal with it on the other.

In addition rap can be taught as a poetic form along with sonnets and the blues, as well as analyzed for vocal rhythm, varying rhyme schemes and other literary techniques. Recently, I used an excerpt from a song entitled "I Gave You Power" by Nas, where he takes on the characteristics of a gun:

I seen some cold nights and bloody days
they grab me bullets spray
They use me wrong so I sing this song 'til this
day

This rap is not just a diatribe in favor of glorified violence. In addition to the personification in this rhyme, Nas touches on a humanities theme by literally and metaphorically leading us through a tale about Black-on-Black crime and the pain that poverty and gun violence have wrought in his community. In the end the gun decides it doesn't want to contribute to the violence, gets jammed up, and won't fire for his owner—who subsequently gets shot and killed because of this "decision." This individual attempt to stop the violence does not work and soon the gun is picked up off the street by another person, and the cycle begins again.

In the same vein of discussing the complexities of being poor and trying to survive, KRS One tells a story in his song, entitled "Love's Gonna Getcha (Material Love)".

See there in school, I'm made a fool.
With one and a half pair of pants, you ain't
cool, but there's no dollars for nothing else.
I got beans, rice, and bread on my shelf.
Everyday I see my mother struggling,
now it's time I've got to do something!
I look for work, I get dissed like a jerk.
I do odd jobs and come home like a slob.
So here comes Rob, his gold is shimmery.
He gives me two hundred for a quick delivery.
I do it once, I do it twice.
Now there's steak with the beans and rice.'

In the song, school doesn't work for him and he's mistreated on the job, so in order to make ends meet, he turns to delivering drugs. You can feel the frustration of his position and the sacrifice that he makes, but as he says, "Now there's steak with the beans and rice...," I use this opportunity to ask the students about how they define a "crime," and inevitably I have to pose the question to the class, "Is the main character in the song a criminal?" The issues at hand are complex, and after some lengthy class discussion, many students identify with the rapper and acknowledge that if you're poor and are just trying to provide for daily things like food and clothing, it is understandable why you might turn to illegal means to achieve your ends — especially if no other opportunities to remedy the situation are otherwise presented.

What I found remarkable in using this song in my classroom was the near universality with which the students accepted KRS Ones message. The school that I teach in is mainly for "drop-out retrieval and retention." The students that attend are mostly from low income families and have left their traditional schools for one reason or another. Some are former gang-bangers, some are teen mothers, some are in group homes, and some just decided they needed a change. But regardless of their varying backgrounds (we average about 8.5% students of color) and experience, the one thing that binds our student body together is that all have felt alienated by their schools and/or society at one time or another. So even though not all students were fans of Rap music, they were still able to identify with the content of "Love's Gonna Getcha."

Additionally, rap mucic can be applied to almost any humanities theme because of its intense political discourse. There are a number of rap groups with political agendas, and you can find

songs with content ranging from nonsensical party lyrics to left-wing revolutionary political outlines. Recently the Boogiemonsters released a cut entitled "The Beginning of the End" that reflects on the realities of life in their neighborhood.

At the crackdown begins intensity
reaches to the maximum and
you really get to see who is your friend.
The same sneakers dangle from the
telephone cable 5-)
forever patrolling my neighborhood is never
stable these days.
This appears to be a concentration camp
eliminating welfare
and still fishing for a victim 'cause from 200th
down to 95th street is all blackly populated
then go further downtown,
it ain't debated who inhabitates the rest
C'mon! We segregated
But that's a'right,
somebody's comin' like a thief in the night
The police state technique is the practice
on the cattle on the humble for the world-
wide battle . . .[8]

In this piece, the Boogiemonsters give the listener a news brief on the crackdowns that have happened in ghettoes and poor neighborhoods all over this country. Additionally important is that the roadblocks and welfare cuts are connected directly to the broader, more historical concepts of concentration camps and a rising police state. I use this song to prompt students to think about what they see going on in their neighborhoods. Many students at my school feel like they are harassed by the police daily. They feel the injustices of racism, misogyny, anti-immigration laws and welfare reform acts on a first hand basis. Depending on which at neighborhood they're from, this song may or may not match their experience. But even for those students that don't feel the harshness of working-class, urban life, these issues beg us to question why people in different neighborhoods are treated differently.

Rhyme, Rhythm and the Politics of Language

Outside of examining rap music for content and style/form, using it in the classroom has another very important function: It forces students to analyze a form of media that they listen to and support regularly. I don't know how many times I've asked a student why they liked a song and they've replied, "I don't know. I just listen to the beats." Rap has become something that they take for granted, a standard, just something to listen to. When I hear students rattling off lyrics they've memorized, about women, about gays and lesbians, about extremely violent behavior, about selling drugs, etc., I always push them to try and step back and really think about what they are saying. This can sometimes get sticky, because as a teacher, I know that students can take such criticism very personally, especially when the critique targets areas they are so connected to like music or culture. The process is long and difficult, and I have yet to find an effective way to get students to be critical of something so close to home. What I try to keep in mind as I engage them is that the misogyny, homophobia, violence, gangs, and material values are all being supported by mainstream American culture, and that the struggle in the classroom is representative of the struggles over larger social issues.

Traditionally, schools marginalize youth by taking an oppositional stance to their clothing styles, language use, and music.[9] So when hip hop is acknowledged or even validated in the classroom we take a steps toward a pedagogy that is based on cultural relevance and student-centered education. When I've used rap music in my lesson plans, I've been deeply impressed with the students' responses. If the boom box comes out and the beats begin to thump, students offer me and the music their rapt attention (no pun intended). Teens know their music intimately, and if given the chance to discuss and share their views about it, they are generally open and enthusiastic. Additionally, students can gain a deeper sense of self-worth when they see their music acknowledged as an art form that holds cultural and technical validity.

For those students who love rap music, writing a rap usually come easily. They've listened to it, heard and read enough lyrics to know what raps sound and look like, and odds are they've written them before. But when it comes to the students who don't listen to rap regularly, the first stumbling block is always, "I don't know how to write a rap!" In response, I have not forced students to write raps as a poetry form, but have left it up to them to decide how they wanted to handle their writing. This has resulted in students producing work in a variety of forms—free-verse, couplets, interior monologues, raps—as well as any hybrid in between. Joel, a Chicano student, wrote the following poem after a workshop where I used rap a entitled "Fat Cats and Bigga Fish" by The Coup as a writing prompt:

Oh dios,
all I ask for forgiveness, though I live a simple
life style
hoping that you hear me out right now
You know the truth ever since I was a little kid,
all the sins
I committed, evil things that I did not to live
is kind of hard in this land of temptation,
Taking it day by day, but I still pray
for my salvation or am I facing total darkness,
dissing stop between heaven and earth still
stressing,
progressing, to live my life around people with
fake smiles
caught up in the mista lie, betrayal, denial.
I've been informing situation that had let you
down and I know that things are gone, it's
gonna come back around.
I've been humiliated with a few two-elephants
with one eight-sevens
damaging my sho' way to heaven
but I know that the moment is coming
cause I feel it in my soul. When it's time for
me to go,

then it'll be time for me to go
and I'll be waiting, waiting
It doesn't faze me, the way I was brought up
in my dayz be starting at
my neighborhood gangs got me crazy,
living off the scraps of life,
ain't that astounding,
and I feel the way I feel influenced by my surrounding,
refused to take a bowing
never can I be a brain when it's time to be taking
gin roll with the Mexican prege.
Hoping that things don't have to be like that
without no trust, it's a definite must the bust, cops.

In a time where the battles over ESL funding, immigrant support, and Ebonics/Standard English are raging nation-wide, Joel's poetry is especially powerful. His poem is pointed in its honesty about his life and his feelings about the world. In terms of poetic form, you can feel Joel's subtle rhyme and rhythm laced throughout the piece, even if it doesn't match a 4/4 timed beat or strict, coupled with a rhyme scheme.

What I feel is most important here is that Joel is not afraid to use his own language, his home language, in his work. Standard English, and its enforcement as the only correct or proper way to speak English, can serve to linguistically handcuff students who are working class or did not learn English as their first language. Using hip hop in the classroom challenges the notion that Standard English is the only legitimate form of English, and supplants it with the idea that the language spoken at home, with friends, or even on the streets is a valid, viable form of communication. Because rap music uses English in particular ways, with its own adaptations and vocabulary, it reflects a sense of language that is non-institutional, non-standard, and non-traditional. It therefore can help pave the way for students to express themselves in forms that are true to their lived experiences and cultures, while increasing their potential creativity, learning, and development.

Whether you enjoy it or not, you will hear rap music every day bumping down the street in the car next to you or see it on your TV pushing the latest soft drink. It is a powerful form of cultural communication that deserves our attention and use in the classroom, particularly if we are to be student-centered in our teaching. Even more important is the idea that using rap in the classroom can serve to decriminalize popular images of youth by providing us with a window for understanding their lives, cultures, and music. So the next time you see students with their headphones on their heads, try asking them about what they're listening to and call it research.

By Wayne Wah Kwai Au

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[1] Hager, Seven (1984). *Hiphop: The Illustrated History of Break Dancing Rap Music and Graffiti*. New York: St.Martin's Press.

[2] To better visualize this, try picturing the following:

While one turntable plays one record, the D.J. is busy rewinding (back-cueing) the other record to the start of the break beat. When the first record plays its part, the D.J. switches to the other turntable and plays the same part over again and proceeds to rewind the first record to the beginning of the break beat - thus starting the process all over again. This is the beginning of modern day sampling and would allow the D.J. to mix up and stretch the favorite part of a song.

[3] This is the origin of the term B-boy or B-girl (break-boy or break-girl).

[4] For instance Japanese B-boys are well respected for their greaking skills and have been accepted as members of the Rocksteady Crew, Latinos are actively involved as M.C.s and rappers, and Filipino Americans have won worldwirde D.J. competitions.

[5] Spearhead (1994). *Home* [LP, Cass, CD]. New York: Captitol Recores Inc.

[6] Nas (1996). *[Gave You Power] Was Written* [LP, Cass, DC]. New York: Columbia

[7] Boogle Down Productions (1990). *Love's Gonna Getcha.* [Single]. New York: Five/RCA

[8] Boogiemonsters (1997). *The Beginning of the End Boogiemonsters- God Sound* [LP, FCass, CD]. New York: EMI Records.

[9] Concretely this "oppositional stance" comes under the guise of things like dress codes, Standard English, and censorship.

[10] For a more complete discussion of Standard Enlgish and the idea of "home langugage" see "Whose Standard? Teaching English in Our Schools" by Linda Christensen, from the book *Rethinking Schools An Agenda For . . . Change*, David Levine, et. al. eds, 1995, New York: The New Press.

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Give Children The Vote

By Vita Wallace

I first become interested in children's rights two years ago, when I learned that several states had passed laws prohibiting high school dropouts from getting driver's licenses. I was outraged, because I believe that children should not be forced to go to school for be penalized if they choose not to, a choice that is certainly the most sensible course for some people.

I am what is called a home schooler. I have never been to school, having always learned at home and in the world around me. Home schooling is absolutely legal, yet as a home schooler, I have had to defend what I consider to be my right to be educated in the ways that make the most sense to me, and so all along I have felt sympathy with people who insist on making choices about how they want to be educated, even if that means choosing not to finish high school. Now this choice is in jeopardy.

Since first learning about the discriminatory laws preventing high school dropouts from getting driver's licenses that have been passed by some state legislatures, I have done a lot of constitutional and historical research that has convinced me that children of all ages must be given the same power to elect their representatives that adults have, or they will continue to be unfairly treated and punished for exercising the few legal options they now have, such as dropping out of high school.

Most people, including children themselves, probably don't realize that children are the most regulated people in the United States. In addition to all the laws affecting adults, including tax laws, children must comply with school attendance laws, child labor laws, and alcohol and cigarette laws. They are denied driver's licenses because of their age, regardless of the dropout issue; they are victims of widespread child abuse; and they are blatantly discriminated against everywhere they go, in libraries, restaurants and movie theaters. They ;have no way to protect themselves: Usually they cannot hire lawyers or bring cases to court without a guardian, and they are not allowed to vote.

The child labor and compulsory schooling laws were passed by well-meaning people to protect children from being forced to work, and compulsory schooling allows all children to get an education. But the abolition of slavery in 1865 didn't end the exploitation of black people. They needed the right to vote and the ability to bring lawsuits against their employers. Children need those rights too. Without them, laws that force children to go to school and generally do not allow them to work may be necessary to prevent exploitation, but they also take away children's rights as citizens to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In my case, the compulsory education laws severely limited my right to "pursuit of happiness" referred to in the Declaration of Independence.

I am 16 now, still not old enough to vote. Like all children, then, the only way I can fight for children's rights is by using my freedom of speech to try to convince adults to fight with me. While I am grateful that I have the right to speak my mind, I believe that it is a grave injustice to deny young people the most effective took they could have to bring about change in a democracy. For this reason, I suggest that the right of citizens under 18 to vote not be denied or abridged on account of age.

Many people argue that it would be dangerous to let loose on society a large group of new votes who might not vote sensibly. They mean that children might not vote for the right candidates. The essence of democracy, however, is letting people vote for the wrong candidates. Democratic society has its risks, but we must gamble on the reasonableness of a doctorship in the first. place.

As it is, only 36 to 40 percent of adults who are eligible to vote actually vote in nonpresidential years, and about 25 percent of the population is under 18. As you can see, our representatives are reelected by a very small percentage of our citizens. That means that although they are responsible for all of us, they are responsible to only a few of us. Politicians are selfish, and a politician's re-election depends on the well-being of the voters. Large segments of society that are not likely or not allowed to vote are either ignored or treated badly because of this system. It would be too much to expect the few always to vote in the interests of the many. Under these circumstances, surely the more people who vote the better, especially if they are of both sexes and of all races, classes and ages.

People also claim that children are irresponsible. Most of the teenagers who act irresponsibly do so simply because they are not allowed to solve their problems in any way that would be considered responsible-through the courts or legislature they fall back on

sabotage of the system because they are not allowed to work within it.

Some people believe that children would vote the way their parents tell them to, which would, in effect, give parents more votes. Similarly, when the Nineteenth Amendment was passed in 1920, giving women the vote, many people thought women would vote the way their husbands did. Now women are so independent that the idea of women voting on command seems absurd. The Nineteenth Amendment was a large part of the process that produced their independence. I think a similar and equally desirable result would follow if children were allowed to vote. They are naturally curious, and most are interested in the electoral process and the results of the elections even though they are not allowed to vote. Lacking world-weary cynicism, they see, perhaps even more clearly than their elders, what is going on in their neighborhoods and what is in the news.

Suffragist Belle Case La Follette's comment that if women were allowed to vote there would be a lot more dinner-table discussion of politics is as true of children today. More debate would take place not only in the home but among children and adults everywhere. Adults would also benefit if politics were talked about in libraries, churches, stores, laundromats and other places where children gather.

People may argue that politicians would pander to children if they could vote, promising for instance that free ice cream would be distributed every day. But if kids were duped, they would not be duped for long. Children don't like to be treated condescendingly.

Even now adults try to manipulate children all the time in glitzy TV ads or, for example, in the supposedly educational pamphlets that nuclear power advocates passout in school science classes. Political candidates speak at schools, addressing auditoriums full of captive students. In fact, schools should be no more or less political than workplaces. Children are already exposed to many different opinions, and they would likely exposed to even more if they could vote. The point is that with the vote, they would be better able to fight such manipulation, not only because they would have the power to do so but because they would have added reason to educate themselves on the issues.

What I suggest is that children be allowed to grow into their own right to be at whatever rate suits them individually. They should not be forced to vote, as adults are not, but neither should they be hindered from voting if they believe themselves capable, as old people are not hindered.

As for the ability to read and write, that should never be used as a criterion for eligibility, since we have already learned from painful pass experience that literacy tests can be manipulated to insure discrimination. In any case, very few illiterate adults vote, and probably very few children would want to vote as long as they couldn't read or write. But I firmly believe that, whether they are literate or not, the vast majority of children would not attempt to vote before they are ready. Interest follows hand in hand with readiness, something that is easy to see as a home schooler but that is perhaps not so clear to many people in this society where, ironically, children are continually taught things when they are not ready, and so are not interested. Yet when they are interested, as in the case of voting, they're told they are not yet ready. I think I would not have voted until I was 8 or 9, but perhaps if I had known I could vote I would have taken an interest sooner.

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My IQ

when i was four years old they
tried to test my IQ
they showed me this picture
of three oranges and a pear
they asked which one
is different and does not
belong
they taught me different
is wrong
when i was thirteen years old
i woke up one morning
thighs covered in blood
like a war like a warning
that i live in a breakable
takeable body
an ever-increasingly valuable
body
that a woman had come
in the night
to replace me
delace me see
my body is borrowed
yeah i got it on loan
for the time in between
my sons and some maggots
i don't need anyone to
hold me i can hold my own
i got highways for stretch marks
see where i've grown
i sing sometimes
like my life is at stake
'cause you're only as loud as the noises you
make
i'm learning to laugh
as loud as i can listen
'cause silence is violence
in women and poor people
if more people were screaming
then I could relax
but a good brain ain't diddly
if you don't have the facts
we live in a breakable
takeable world
an ever available possible
world
and we can make music
like we can make do
genius is in a back beat
back seat to nothing
if you're dancing
especially something
stupid like IQ
for every lie i unlearn
i learn something new
i sing sometimes for
the war that I fight
'cause every tool is a
weapon
if you hold it
right

BY ANI DIFRANCO

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Records, Inc.

ANI DIFRANCO borrowed money from friends to cover the costs of incorporation and studio time, and produced her own self-titled debut album in 1990. Still independent and running her own recording company — Righteous Babe Records — she tours widely.

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False Assumptions

BY GREG MITCHIE

A-S-S-U-M-E

I don't recall exactly what triggered it, but I remember my sixth grade teacher writing that word on the board in tall, perfectly formed letters. He glanced at us for a moment, a sarcastic grin on his face, then turned back to the board, where he divided the word into three parts with two quick strokes of the chalk.

ASS / U / ME

"Do you know that you should never assume?" he asked us. "Because if you assume," he continued, gesturing toward his handiwork, "then you make an ass out of you and me." He looked back at us again, apparently *assuming* two things: one, that we'd think his joke was funny, and two, that even if we did, we hadn't already heard it a hundred times before.

Teachers make assumptions about students all the time. If a second grader has difficulty reading, he's "slow." If a student's spoken English is limited, so is her ability to think. If a kid's parents are poor, they're also uninformed and unconcerned. In my seven years of teaching in Chicago public schools, I've heard all these and more. I remember going to Mrs. Malcheski during her prep period one day and asking to borrow some purple construction paper. She walked over to her supply cabinet and began spinning the dial on a combination lock.

"I have to keep everything locked up," she said.

"Why?" I wondered out loud.

"Tino Suarez," she said.

"What about him?"

"He's in my room."

"So?" I said, not getting it.

"Don't you know?" she asked in a secretive tone. "He's in a gang."

Samuel De La Cruz

For a middle school teacher such as myself, one of the most tempting assumptions to make is that students simply do not care. You look out every day at blank faces staring back at you or at kids who are in open rebellion, and conclude that your students couldn't care less—about what you teach them, how you teach them, or whether or not they end up learning anything. You then turn around and use this mistaken idea in an attempt to explain the behaviors you see as its symptoms: why the kids don't listen, why they don't do their homework, why they can't answer number six, why they throw tacks at one another, and so on. The kids act this way, you convince yourself, because today's young people are a nihilistic bunch who, truth be told, just don't give a damn. Which was precisely my first impression of 12-year-old Samuel de la Cruz.

Samuel's hobby was starting trouble. At least that's the hobby he listed on the "All About Me" handout I gave my seventh-grade students early that year. Curly-haired, small and wiry, Samuel was gleefully immature in most social situations. Making fart noises seemed to be his favorite pastime. That or poking his index finger through the zipper of his pants and wiggling it around like an overexcited penis. If there was someone around to be pushed or pinched or peed on, you could count on Samuel to oblige. In our initial class sessions, his attention span hovered somewhere between thirty and sixty seconds, depending on the educational product being advertised.

"Why do you think you have so much trouble focusing on what we're doing, Samuel?" I asked him early that year during a one-on-one writing conference.

"In the first place, because I'm lazy," Samuel said. "And in the second place . . . " I thought to myself, you just don't give a sh--, do you? I didn't say it, though.

So when Samuel's young homeroom teacher, Ms. Reilly, announced to her class that November afternoon that they were too much, that they had driven her to the brink, that she couldn't take it anymore and, well, that she just might have to quit, I wouldn't have believed Samuel would give the matter a second thought. I certainly wouldn't have expected him to be the kid to wage a one-person campaign against Ms. Reilly's threatened early retirement. But he did. And after I read the works he'd written to his teacher during my writing class one day, I never quite looked at Samuel in the same way again.

Dear Miss Reilly,

I want to tell you that your a great teacher, but I know that I dont pay attenchen, and I know i am not trying my best. Sorry that I get in troble. But you know what, I could help you. By trying it my way. Look Miss Reilly this is your chance. It's like god send me. Im going to give you some pointers. Step Number 1. Let the children play and learn. Like with the flash cards. Get four people, one is the one that holds the cards,

and the other ones are the ones that have to say the answer. And spelling the same. Have one person tell the word, but this time on a peace of paper make them rit it down, and the person that told the word, well make them corect the word and let them countinue. Social studies the same. Get four people, and have a person tell the Question and have three people answer it. But this time by the mouth. And four English the same. I am doing this four you and the students not just four me. Just give it a try four us don't quit on us, please miss Reilly we care about you. Think about it we will Learn fast and you dont have to work that hard and there probely wont be no problems. Look at it this way. You dont have to waste your anergy and you will be happy. I am doing this all just four you. And remember think about it. By the way we care about you.

Sameul's letter showed that not only did he possess a genuine affection for Ms. Reilly, which he admitted openly, but that he cared quite a bit about classroom matters as well. He may not have been well versed in educational jargon, but he made his opinions clear nonetheless. He acknowledged the importance of the core subjects, came down firmly on the side of cooperative learning and peer tutoring, gave the nod to a bit of skill and drill, and by its blatant omission expressed his extreme distaste for lecturing or direct instruction. He even seemed aware of the fact that many teachers feel overburdened, assuring Ms. Reilly that, with his plan, she would not have to work that hard or waste her "anergy."

Over the course of the rest of the year, I came to view Samuel as one of the most original thinkers I'd ever taught. While most of us were content to see the world in three dimensions, Samuel was constantly on the lookout for four or five. When I assigned his class the task of drawing a floor plan of their bedroom, Samuel not only turned in a detailed, full-color plan of his family's entire apartment, but a full-blown, hand-made model as well. Out of cardboard and construction paper he formed stairways, counter tops, toilets, beds, tables—all done more or less to scale and glued in their proper place within the apartment's four walls. The logo Samuel designed for *"On Our Mind,"* our classroom literary magazine, incorporated drawings of a switchblade, a bouncing basketball, a snake, bullet holes, two people kissing, a fountain, a stick of dynamite, a cat's tail, melting wax and an exploding brick wall — all within the nine letters of the publication's name. When given the opportunity to use his considerable artistic talents, the creativity seemed to race uncontrollably from Samuel's heart, through every vein in his body and out his fingertips. And all of this, I hasten to add, from a guy I once thought didn't give a flip.

. . . the creativity seemed to race uncontrollably from Samuel's heart, through every vein in his body and out his fingertips. And all of this, I hasten to add, from a guy I once thought didn't give a flip.

Ruby Anaya

Ruby Anaya didn't care too much, either. That's what her social studies teacher, Mr. Shepherd, thought anyway. He believed the test results that said Ruby was learning disabled, even though her frequent and incisive comments in class made it clear that this was not the case. But that was exactly the problem with Ruby, according to Mr. Shepherd. She talked too much. He preferred that she be quiet and listen while he outlined the details of the Louisiana Purchase or the Monroe Doctrine. After all, he knew his stuff. Whatever else might be said about Mr. Shepherd, one could not question his knowledge of his subject matter. But in recent years, he had rarely been able to put his impressive scholarship on display. Instead, he spent most of his time in class asking for quiet, demanding attention, dealing with misbehavior, thwarting real or imagined insurrections.

It hadn't always been that way. Years earlier, at a school on the far northwest side of the city, Mr. Shepherd had been a beloved third-grade teacher to a different generation of kids. I learned this one afternoon when a former student of his came by our school to visit. He had been taught by Mr. Shepherd sixteen years earlier. The guy told me Mr. Shepherd had changed the direction of his life. "He opened my eyes," the former student said. "Mr. Shepherd was the most caring teacher I ever had."

It was almost impossible to reconcile this image of Mr. Shepherd with the man I saw do battle with students on a daily basis. What had changed? Was it Shepherd? The students? The world? Whatever it was, it was clear that in a different place and time, Ruby and Mr. Shepherd might have found a way to learn from one another. They might have even been able to see that, underneath it all, they both cared a great deal. But at this point in their educational careers, Ruby and Mr. Shepherd seemed destined to be at odds. They happened to cross paths at a time in their lives when a classroom was one of the last places either of them wanted to be.

One afternoon during a routine lecture, Mr. Shepherd reached his breaking point. Ruby had spoken up one too many times.

"Could you go over that section again?" Ruby asked.

Mr. Shepherd looked up from his reading. He attempted to sound pleasant. "What didn't you understand about it?"

"It's just that the way you're reading it is putting me to sleep."

"You know what?" Shepherd said. "I've had about enough of your mouth. I've been teaching for longer than you have been alive. I don't have to sit here

and listen to your smart-aleck comments."

Ruby temporarily ignored Shepherd's outburst and shrugged her shoulders. Then, under her breath, she muttered, "That don't make no sense."

Shepherd wasn't as agile as he once was, but his hearing was just fine. "Out!" he yelled from his green padded rolling chair. "I want you out of here now!"

Ruby trudged up the stairs to report to Rhonda Hoskins, the upper grade head teacher. Shepherd had sent her to Ms. Hoskins's office for misbehaving twice before, so she wasn't nervous. She knew that Ms. Hoskins was firm, but fair. She was a disciplinarian with a novel approach: She listened to what kids had to say.

"What happened?" Ms. Hoskins asked, glancing up from her computer screen and seeing Ruby slumped in the doorway.

"Mr Shepherd kicked me out again," said Ruby.

"You two just can't seem to get along these days, can you?" Ms. Hoskins asked.

"I know," Ruby said. "It's not all my fault, though. He don't listen to me." Ms. Hoskins did listen as Ruby tried to explain her frustrations.

"I think I hear what you're saying, Ruby," Ms. Hoskins said. "It sounds like both parties could do some improving to me. What do you think?"

"Yeah," Ruby admitted.

"Why don't you try writing about it tonight when you go home? Explain to me in writing what you think you can do to improve the situation with Mr. Shepherd."

"You only want me to write about what I need to do to improve? What about him?"

"Okay, Ruby. Tell me what each of you can do. Bring it in tomorrow before school and we'll discuss it. Maybe Mr. Shepherd would be interested in reading it, too."

"Yeah, right," Ruby said with a laugh and a roll of her dark brown eyes.

That night, Ruby went home and, despite the uninterrupted wailing of her 16-year-old sister's newborn baby, somehow managed to compose a lengthy rough draft of her essay. After everyone else had gone to bed, she copied it over in black ink, making a few changes and covering her mistakes with careful applications of white-out. Ms. Hoskins found it on her desk at eight o'clock the next morning.

"It might look dead to the world, but as long as he could see just a little bit of green — just the littlest bit — he'd keep watering it, keep tending to it. You'd be surprised at what comes back around if you just stay with it."

How we could Improve

By Ruby Anaya

If we want to improve ourselves, we must understand each other. I think teachers should try to make school fun. The kids should pay more attention and not act dum, and not get into alot of trouble. Also, to do our homework every day. Teachers must also know how to control the kids but not get out of hand like trying to abuse the students. The children want to learn and they need some help to go on in life.

If the teacher wants the children to learn he should help, not say that they are dum. If teachers lose their patience they should have it under control, not come out and say some wrong things and make the children feel bad. That's why the children act the way they act, not wanting to learn. I also hate it when the teachers criticized a child or even some other teachers. There are some people that think they could say any dum things that they want and we won't get mad.

I think that if we want to improve we need to get our minds together. Some teachers need to stop having a high temper and stop blaming the kids that it's their fault he got sick. And just because you got mad at one kid, don't go to another kid and start screaming at them. That's one of the problems teacher's have is that they get mad with one kid and then they get mad at the rest of the class.

I would like to improve myself but there is some people that make me mad and makes me think that maybe its not worth it. Some people say that we are not worth it and that we are nothing. Thats what gets us mad.

I think we could improve but we must have a little help. All parents, teachers and especially us children must put forth some effort. Everyone must try hard and put in their opinions. Everyone in the world needs help in something. Some people think that they are so perfect and that they know every little thing because they are so perfect. My advice is not to think you know everything because you really don't know nothing.

What I am trying to say is that we must all join together and that way we could understand each other. My purpose for writing this composition is because I want to open a person's mind and make them understand that they are not alone. Everybody has problems, even the president. If someone has a problem you should talk to them and help them and give them some of your opinions. Maybe they could change. People need some help, and need some attention. So take my advice and help someone before it's too late.

Derrick Laney

Two summers ago I made a couple of important purchases: I bought my first house and my first iron. The house is a typical South Side Chicago bungalow — a twenty-foot-wide brick structure on a twenty-five-foot-wide lot — with what my father calls a "postage-stamp" yard behind it (I have one tree in my backyard; my brother and his wife, who bought a house in North Carolina around the same time, have over sixty). According to my neighbors, the yard was at one time a local tourist attraction. The woman who'd lived there had apparently tended a flower garden that was unparalleled. No matter what time of year it was, there was always something blooming, and in the summer, they say, it was a sight to behold.

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I had never done any gardening before, but I thought it would be a fun hobby to take on, so when my parents came to visit that October, my mother and I began trying to whip the yard back into shape. The previous occupant, a renter, had let things get a bit out of control. It was a jungle back there.

I learned two lessons that weekend as we dug, hoed, pulled, and planted. One is that it's awful hard sometimes to tell a weed from a flower. The other is something my mother had picked up from her father, who I had known as Papa. "As far as Daddy was concerned, there was no such thing as giving up on a plant," my mother told me as we transplanted a pitiful-looking Columbine. "It might look dead to the world, but as long as he could see just a little bit of green — just the littlest bit — he'd keep watering it, keep tending to it. You'd be surprised at what comes back around if you just stay with it."

Buying the house was a big deal, but the iron purchase, in some ways, was even more significant. I hadn't owned one since moving to Chicago several years earlier, and had gone to school in rumpled clothes so often that on the rare occasion I wore something that had been dry cleaned and pressed, kids and adults alike often did double-takes. "Mr. Michie, what happened?" a girl named Norma asked me one day when I wore a pair of properly laundered khakis. "Your pants ain't all wrinkled!"

As I compared prices at a local discount store, trying to figure out what a forty-dollar iron does that a twelve-dollar iron doesn't, a friendly voice came from over my shoulder. "May I help you?" the voice said. I turned to see a young man with a shiny name badge that said *Dee* and a tightly knotted black tie.

. . . the creativity seemed to race uncontrollably from Samuel's heart, through every vein in his body and out his fingertips. And all of this, I hasten to add, from a guy I once thought didn't give a flip.

"What's up, Mr. Michie? remember me?"

It took a few seconds but then his face registered. It was Derrick Laney, a seventh grader from my first year of teaching, back at Ellison. I hadn't seen him since then. It was hard to believe, but five years had gone by. I asked Derrick what he had been up to. He told me he had attended a Catholic high school, done well, played on the basketball team, sung in the choir, graduated on time and most recently, received a partial scholarship to a nearby college to study choral music. His plan was to become a choir director.

Derrick Laney a choir director? I had trouble picturing it. Was this the same Derrick Laney who sat every day in the back corner, next to the window, his legs stretched out to annoyingly lick the desk in front of him with his oversized, untied Timberlands? Was it the same Derrick Laney who rarely pus' ed himself, who talked back, who wore a perpetual smirk, and who only turned in his work when it jeopardized his basketball eligibility? Was it really the same Derrick Laney I had assumed didn't care much about himself, about his future—about anything?

It was the same Derrick, of course. He was more focused than he had been as a seventh grader. More confident. More willing to show that he cared. When he was my student, I had all but written him off. I had let what he showed outwardly convince me that he had given up, checked out, thrown in the towel. I had found comfort in telling myself there were other kids to help, other kids who cared about their lives and their futures. But it was obvious now that Derrick cared, too, and I wondered if he had as a seventh grader as well. He may not have shown it, he may have given every outward appearance to the contrary, but I bet underneath all of Derrick's thirteen-year-old frustration and alienation was a part of him who did care—a little bit of green. It was a part of him I had failed to see. . .

The unfortunate postscripts to all this is that, despite Samuel and Ruby's thoughtful and heartfelt critiques, neither of their letters did much good. In each case, the teacher showed little interest in reading the correspondence, much less in taking seriously what the child had to say or in using it to improve the climate of the classroom. Ms. Reilly (who, by the way, did not go through with her premature retirement plans) was somewhat touched by Samuel's note, but, after reading it, laughed off his proposals as "cute." She never acknowledged to him that she'd read his letter. Mr. Shepherd, with every bit of his twenty-plus years of teaching serving him well, I imagine, didn't even make it to the end of Ruby's seven-page, neatly written composition . . .

Greg Michie teaches at Seward Elementary School on the southwest side of Chicago. His essay is adapted from his recently completed book *Holler If You Hear Me* which is currently seeking publication.

TIME TO CHANGE THE **NO PAGER LAW** IN CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS . . .

BY **ELIZABETH JESSICA SMALL**

Group 4- Acts of Misconduct 4-8 Possession, use, or delivery of pagers, cellular telephones, and/or other prohibited electronic devices.

Pagers are illegal in Chicago Public Schools and most of us know that. In mid December Foreman had a massive student search that took place at the entrance for students. This search is not uncommon in Chicago schools. Schools all over the city have "raids" similar to the one that was experienced at Foreman. After the search a lot of controversy comes up. People say that their rights were violated. I'm not going to talk about that. The bust is made to keep the schools safe from guns, drugs, knives and other dangerous weapons that can be snuck into a school, but what is always found is pagers, and lots of them. Now I don't know about you but I don't feel very threatened by a little electronic device that beeps when I have a message.

The law that bans pagers from being allowed in schools was made about ten years ago. The law was made to keep pagers out of the hands of drug dealers while they were in a school building. Now I must admit that the law was a smart one, ten years ago. Nowadays everybody carries a pager. You can go to any electronic store and buy one for under fifty dollars. Students, doctors, police officers, teachers, and people in many other professions carry pagers. The law is no longer in the conditions that it was originally introduced for.

It is wrong that students are harassed for carrying pagers by people who carry pagers. Take a look around the school and you'll notice that many people are carrying pagers. They aren't carrying pagers because they are drug dealing, they are carrying pagers for the same reason that most of the students carry pagers, so their family and friends can get a hold of them.

People say that drug dealers carry pagers so their clients can get ahold of them, so schools try to cut out the middle man by eliminating the pagers. Well, I have news for Paul Vallas and the Chicago Police Department . . . If pagers are banned drug dealers can still find a way to get in touch with their clients. As we all know, society has a drug problem, and drug deals may go down near schools, abut I don't think that these kids are dealing through the use of pagers, at least not while they are in school.

There are many rules in schools that security guards try to enforce. If they are going to make a rule that has to be enforced, they should be rules that have meaning. The no-pager rule is no longer valid. Pagers are too accessible and too common for generalizations to be made about the people who carry them. Just a word to the wise, as long as the pager law is around, try to follow it. Teenagers are already at a disadvantage, don't give anybody reasons to harass us.

ELIZABETH JESSICA SMALL recently graduated from high school, where she wrote for her school paper and questioned authority. She will attend Roosevelt University in Chicago, beginning in the fall of 1998.

WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS OVER SOUTH PARK

BY **ELIZABETH JESSICA SMALL**

South Park is a cartoon about four second grade boys who live in a small town called South Park. Everyday they attend South Park Elementary and after school they hang out at each other's houses. Sounds like a good, wholesome cartoon right, WRONG!!

This is a cartoon on Comedy Central. These boys along with their classmates, teachers, and townspeople are far from normal. Eric Cartman is a ninety-pound seven-year old. At home he is very spoiled by his June Cleaver-type mother. Kenny, "the poor kid" as people in the town refer to him, has an alcoholic father and a pretty out-of-it mother. He always wears the same orange-hooded sweat shirt and because of it his voice is muffled. Stan is the brain of the group. He has an abusive older sister and he is in love with a girl in the class, Wendy. Kyle has a pretty short temper and a "colorful" vocabulary.

The show covers a range of topics such as race relations, gun control, education, starving children in Ethiopia, censorship, substance abuse, Kathy Lee Gifford coming to town, aliens capturing people, and other politically astute issues. These seem like good/nice topics to explore in a cartoon, but South Park explores them in a sick and twisted way.

South Park is a younger, although no less obnoxious version of *Beavis and Butthead*. It is not any less vulgar. In every episode there are hidden messages, either on the chalkboard or something that Kenny says. Kenny is the unlucky child who dies in every episode (almost). This is definitely a show that you should try to catch, although most would admit it is an acquired taste. Just make sure that there are no little kids around to watch these little kids mirror the adult world.

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student poetry

When I Walk Down the Street

You see the run-down buildings
and think this is not for your kind of living
You see litter wherever you go
and think these people are next to animals.
You come from far
and don't dare get out of your car
When I walk down the street
I don't see what you see

I don't only see gangsters on the corner
or people getting poorer
I'm not blind to recognize
that there's beauty and Love here in disguise.
When I walk down the street
I don't see what you see.

From the homely kitchen to the outside world,
I can smell those delicious burritos.
I can ***taste*** *the penny candy*
at a small store named Gandy's.
On a porch across the street,
the lips of that beautiful Hispanic girl would ***feel*** *so sweet.*
Don't you ***hear*** *those birds singing*
or those children laughing?
Don't you ***see*** *that flower in the cup through the window of that run-down building*
surrounded corrupt "five-o"?
When I walk down the street
I don't see what you see.

Some of you feel sorry for us.
May even try to help us.
Then you say you're doing something good.
But you don't want us anywhere near your neighborhood.
Some of you treat us like dogs.
Always ready to call the law.
You use your guns of hate
and threaten to exterminate
Police on the scene.
Almost a massacre at Cabrini Green
When you fail at genocide
you simply push us aside
and pretend we don't exist
but I promise you this - you will never succeed after all your tries
because we will one day come together
and rise.
When I walk down the street
I'm glad I don't see what you see.

BY FRANK VAISVILAS

FRANK VIASVILAS ecscaped his shyness by becoming a poet. His poems have veen published in Chicago's student publication *Star Wallpaper.* Frank believes his enthusiasm for the written word comes from his love of The Beatles.

Till The World Blow Up

I'm a true rebellious boy. I know I am.
I'm not a child more a man.
But if the world would let me be
Then I shall rebel and let them see.
I feel the pride in myself.
I come to fight to drop your wealth.
I know there are more just like me.
I know they just want to really be free.
So here I go and now I duck,
And fight this war till the world blow up

Just like Oklahoma . . .

The Urban Life

The homeless man sheds tears tonight
Wishing to change and make things right.
The ordinary man suffers of love and passion.
The woman sleeps with the "sancho" for fun -
and distraction..
Even now the young perish
Because of the harm.
Wanting the drugs to feel the charm.
And the rebelers still fight their war.
Gang banging to feel hard core.
And the puppy loves that the young
beginners have.
Still they need to understand
Confusion rises when it hits
Their minded plans.
The night is the predator who seeks for
Those who still yet have to learn and know.
Reminiscing through the wrong
neighborhood
Can cause a nightly gun show.
And the crews morph into the vagabonds
That roam the night.
The bedlamights still panic in fright.
Because of the tyrant that confiscated,
raped
And gets away.
Yes, indeed, this is a crazy world as
You can say.
But let us learn what's right from wrong
These are God's tests in life.
So just play along

BY CARLOS DIAZ

CARLOS DIAZ is sixteen and lives in the Back of the Yards neighborhood in Chicago. In addition to poetry, Carlos enjoys drawing, acting and grafitti writing.

Evolution

BY BYRON MASON

I grew up in a family that was like most families, I guess, back in the 70's when the majority of black families were headed by a mother and a father. I grew up in a time when "classic" soul music wasn't classic at all but could be heard on the radio, at the corner lounge, and even blaring from my father's hi-fi stereophonic record player in our living room. It was right at the beginning of the explosion of America's black middle-class and times were good then, especially for a little black boy growing up on the south side of Chicago. I remember it was a Sunday evening, not different from any other Sunday evening in our house. We had all adjourned to the living room after dinner to watch television. My parents assumed their usual position on the sofa and my brother and I plopped down on the floor in front of our huge 27-inch floor model Zenith color TV. During the course of the evening I surprised my parents by commenting on someone I saw on the screen. "He's cute!" I said to myself out loud, not realizing what I had just said was in any way unusual. My parents quickly looked over at me and my mother replied "boys don't call other boys cute, you're supposed to say handsome." I complied. I don't think either one of us knew the importance of my disclosure at the time but my choice of words was not said out of ignorance. I was seven years old and something was in place within me that was different from most boys. It would take me years to figure out exactly what it was and to become comfortable enough with it to express my feelings. This is the story of that journey.

From as far back as I could remember my life wasn't like most kids I knew. First of all, I have an identical twin brother, so that basically meant instant popularity in the neighborhood and at school. The attention it brought was fun for the most part, but having someone who looks just like you, sounds just like you, and even thinks just like you can be frustrating at times. Constantly being compared intellectually, scholastically and physically created fierce competition between my brother and I. We both desperately wanted to break free from being treated as one individual instead of two separate beings. This desire translated into the creation of two strong senses of individuality, based upon purposely searching for any kind of difference between us. Rather than naturally allowing our different personality characteristics and interests come forth, we vowed to "not be like him" at all costs. This unique dynamic of not wanting to be the same would follow us throughout our adolescence and even into our adulthood.

Somewhere around the age of eleven or twelve, when most boys are beginning to discover their sexuality, I realized that something wasn't quite right. While most of my friends were becoming interested in girls as something other than targets of our insults, I realized that I had no interest in doing the same. I had always been happier in the company of other boys and didn't want to lose my friends to "the enemy." When my sexuality finally began to emerge, I found that my camaraderie with other boys was more like an attraction. Throughout my childhood the feelings that I had toward other boys were quite natural. My pre-pubescent thinking had assumed that boys hung out with boys, girls hung out with girls, and that's the way it would be. It wasn't until my friends started hanging with "them" that I was forced to redefine my thinking and put a label to what I was feeling. Surprisingly, never did it think that what I was feeling was wrong or bad. I figured that like being a twin, I was just different.

It wasn't until I was thirteen years old that I finally could connect a word to my feelings. Somehow I learned about the word "homosexual" and I quickly went searching for any information I could find. With the help of various editions of my parent's dictionaries and an intensive search through the encyclopedia, I became aware of what a homosexual was and realized that I was one. By this time I was in the eighth grade, the idea of talking to one of the Fathers or Sisters at my private Catholic elementary school was not an option. Talking to my parents about sex in general, especially homosexuality, was out of the question. So I kept all of my questions to myself. Looking back at those times, I realize how much isolation was a part of my life. At a time when a teenager needs the most support, I had none. For me, graduating and going into high school, which is supposed to be one of the most important steps in one's life, was filled with so many unanswered questions and uncertainty, and attending an all-boys Christian prep school didn't make my situation any easier.

My high school experience was a four year masquerade, filled with basketball games, girlfriends and proms. Being "one of the guys" was what I was supposed to do to fit in, and if you don't fit in, you don't exist, so I dared not go against the norm. As with my previous school, I would never dream of talking to one of the Brothers about my confusion and isolation. There was no school nurse, no sex education classes, I

escape the solitude of thinking that I was the only kid in the world who felt this way. It's almost sad to think that many of my classmates were experiencing the same agony I was but none of us could speak out about it. Years later, having discovered that several of my high school friends, as well as some of the Brothers, were also gay, I am able to laugh about it. I only wish I had that same luxury back then.

In the course of my journal writing, I naturally developed an affinity for writing poetry. Through writing poetry, I could release my frustrations on paper and creatively manipulate words to mask their true identity. For me, as a young gay man, writing was my escape. Writing was my way of dealing with all the loneliness that I thought would always be a part of my life. Writing was the only way I could find some kind of validation for the feelings that had emerged within me. Through my poetry, you can hear all of the happiness and joy as well as the fear, the uncertainty and even the sadness:

Dear God
Last night I prayed for an angel to come to me
and claim my life
For the very first time,
death appeared to be the light at the end of my tunnel
Last night I wanted to die,
not only to end the pain of my own private hell,
but to meet you, God
I wanted to die because I had to know the reason why I have been chosen
for this life that you have given me
I know that you've heard me praying
Were they not to your liking, God?
And I'm sure you've grown tired of my tears,
because I am surely tired of shedding them
Was this not enough for you?
I wanted to die because I had to know how much more
of this is in store for me?
How much more of this grief is going to be sent my way?
I've asked, even begged you to give me some kind of sign or clue
That better things are waiting for me in the future
But I have heard nothing in response
So I'm giving up
I'm giving up trying to figure all of these things out on my own
I'm giving up on the hope of happiness,
on the desire for another,
on the possibility of love,
maybe even my faith in you, God
I don't think I am strong enough to last until you are ready
to show me all the joy that I have tried so hard to show to others
I don't know if I can last until then
I don't know if I can take much more of the emotional
dips and turns of this road that I've been on
But I promise you that tonight I'll sleep
That I'll endure another night of hell
and another day of darkness
I promise you to hold on for a little while longer, God
And that I won't let go
of what is left of this so-called life of mine
And on the desire for living

Despite the melancholy tone of this poem, and others like it, I somehow made it through those dark times without resorting to some sort of destructive behavior or even ending things permanently. Throughout my high school career, I continued keeping a daily journal and writing poems, sharing them with no one, not even myself. Aside from my poems, I have never read anything that I've written in the several volumes of journals I own. Perhaps one day when I'm old I'll sit down and read them all, but at the time it was just a way to get me through the day.

It wasn't until I went away to college that I finally found support for being gay. It was during college that I fully became aware of who I was and allowed myself to truly explore my sexuality. Maybe it had something to do with being away from home for the first time. Attending school in Atlanta, almost 1,000 miles away, essentially forced me find a new comfort zone. My parents weren't around anymore. There were no more high school buddies to masquerade for, I could basically be whomever I wanted to be without worrying about those who were close to me finding out.

Going to school in Atlanta definitely had its advantages. Besides having a predominately African American population, Atlanta has one of the largest gay communities in the country. The new level of support that I got from the historically black university I attended was liberating. The energy on campus was intense and for the first time in my life I was proud. I was proud to be in the presence of so many black people from so many different backgrounds: from the city kids of the north, to the small town southerners. Having been exposed to different beliefs, concerns and ideologies taught me that life, by any means, did not revolve around south the south side of Chicago. In Atlanta I learned what it was to be an African American man and the power that came with it. All my life I had been treated like a suspect by white society and was assumed to be straight by my own community. In Atlanta I learned about all the many things that black men are and could be and that I didn't have to restrict myself to one defining (straight) mold.

With the rise of this new sense of pride in just being black, naturally a sense of pride in being gay would follow. During my freshman year I would experience a second coming out process, only this time, instead of coming out to myself, I would grow comfortable enough to let others know who I really was. One particular event during my second semester would prove to be a turning point in that process: As with most gay people, going to a gay club for the first time can literally be a

crush of emotions. The first time I went to a gay club was nothing less than terrifying, primarily because I was underage and secondly because I had no idea of what to expect. I arrived at the club with a friend about 1:00 a.m., which surprisingly isn't very late for gay clubs. The enormous club was housed in an old warehouse in the middle of Atlanta's industrial district. The building was rather plain looking, probably so it would not be detected as a gay establishment. As we walked up to the entrance, I immediately noticed the thumping bass emanating from inside and the rise of heat and smoke coming from an open door on the building's fire escape. I handed the doorman my fake ID, praying that he wouldn't embarrass me in front of the crowd of people in the line behind me. I knew I didn't look a day over sixteen but he let me in anyway. As we paid our money and walked up the stairs into the club the music became louder and louder. We found ourselves on the second floor of the club which gave us the opportunity to look down onto the dance floor and around the bar. I was amazed! There were several hundred people, mostly men, dancing and drinking and meeting and greeting. What surprised me was that the people there appeared to be normal, everyday folks. As I glanced around, I saw people who looked like me, not the drag queens and guys in leather that I thought I'd see. In a state of disbelief, I couldn't help asking my friend "Are all of these people gay?" I had never really seen black gay men before, well, not black gay men who weren't the stereotypes that I had grown up making fun of. I was shocked to see to men dancing together, or standing around with their arms around each other. Black men being affectionate to one another was something that was incomprehensible to me, and just my mere presence there to witness it somehow validated everything that I had endured throughout my entire adolescence.

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Needless to say I had a great time that night! I came home and immediately wrote everything down in my journal. What was most important about that night is that it allowed me feel secure enough to explore this new "lifestyle" even further and establish bonds with men in ways that I always felt were reserved for women. I continued my process by telling a few close friends and by the beginning of my sophomore year, most of my friends knew that I was gay. It even became well known around campus that one of the Mason twins was straight and one of the Mason twins was gay, which caused problems with my brother and I because he worried that some people would assume that he was gay as well (which they did). I didn't care. I began to explore sex, dating and all of its compli-cations. I even fell in love. My first relationship with another man lasted three years, and in it I learned more about what it meant to be a gay man. First I had to unlearn all of the rigid ideas of black manhood that I had carried with me all of my life. In order for me to come to grips with calling another man my "boyfriend," I had to throw away all of the heterosexual dynamics of dating that I was trying to apply to our relationship. It took quite a while for me to realize that we were two men who loved each other and neither one of us were required to assume the role of the female. But mostly I learned from friends that black gay men are a comfortably hidden minority. We are so intertwined within the fabric of the black community that we aren't willing to risk the rejection from our own community for being gay on top of the rejection from the larger white community for being black. This dynamic was troublesome for me. Having finally tasted a bit of my own private freedom, I refused to turn back and subscribe to that school of thought. I had already wasted too much energy in the past to continue living a semi-out, semi-closeted life.

By my senior year in college I was ready to take the final and most important step in my life and tell my parents who I was. After vehement opposition by my brother ,who was more concerned with the safety of his own perceived sexuality rather than with my sanity, I decided it was time that they knew. Perhaps it was easier for me to tell them with several hundred miles between us but luckily the experience was a lot less scary than my brother and I had anticipated. Both of my parents have been nothing less than completely supportive and accepting of me from that point on and had even expressed concerned that I wasn't comfortable enough to tell them sooner.

After coming out to my family, any obstacle that was in the way of my personal happiness was eliminated. The feeling of not having to hide is unexplainable. To have the acceptance of the two most important people in my life rendered everything and everyone that was any less accepting insignificant. In my mind, nothing else mattered because my parents (still) loved me and anyone

who had any kind of issue with my sexuality, gay or straight, would not be a part of my life. This new empowerment paved the way for me to become more open to friends and family and even sparked a political awareness in gay arenas that had always been present in black arenas. I had finally reached my point of total acceptance, some 10 years after the initial realization of my burgeoning sexuality.

It may be cliche to say that the events of your past shape who you are today but those words are quite appropriate in this situation. The immeasurable guidance that I have received, after searching for answers alone for so long, have allowed me to live my life as openly and honestly as I can, not only for my own sense of happiness but in many way to let others know that black gay men exist and are a part of the black family structure. That existence has to be known. Throughout the years, my writing has matured and developed as I have, and has continued to serve not only a my outlet but as one my passions. Several of my contributions have been published in journals and reviews across the U.S. and I have even founded two black gay theater companies in Atlanta and Chicago. I mention these achievements because they are unprecedented. The public's reception of these two groups have been amazing. To witness, on stage, portrayals of black gay life sheds light on our many universal but remarkably unique experiences. For the community at large, the experience is educational, for black gay men and lesbians, its validating. For me, my writing is my chance to give a voice to a community that either has not, cannot, or will not speak out. My story is not unusual or extraordinary, it just has not been heard. But whether it is on paper or on stage, the fact that black men are loving other black men is definitely something to talk about.

Byron Mason received his Bachelor of Science in Sound Engineering from Georgia State University in 1995. He currently resides in San Francisco, California where he works in the field of HIV/AIDS research and prevention.

The Destined Ones

Hang on, Mi Raza
I come to tell you the truth
That keeps us from uniting
We were taken advantage of
Spit on
Beaten
Tied in Chains
Imprisoned only to be bombarded
By white stones
Those who say words, talk noise
And choke on their own sins
""El Gringo""
We cross to make futures our dreams
We in time will heal our wounds
For our ancestors sat on devine thrones
Of Aztlan
We are the destined ones
So watch out you ""Yuppies""
Brace yourselves, arm
Yourselves, or run
We are taking over
And the last think you'l have is a prayer
Because a prayer is the last refuge of a
Scoundrel

by Carlos Diaz

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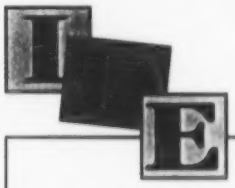

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